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ON THUNDERED BUCKSKIN BEN, THE RIGHT ARM OF LULA LA COSTE AROUND HIS NECK, HIS OWN ENCIRCLING HER WAIST.

Buckskin Ben, of Texas;

OR,

SINGLE-EYE'S PLUCKY PARDS.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"

(Maj. Sam S. Hall,)

AUTHOR OF "FRIO FRED," "CREEPING CAT,"
"THE STRANGE PARD," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LINE OF DEATH.

THE Rio San Saba, Texas, runs for seventy-five miles, from Fort McKavett, almost due east, and then, swerving northeasterly, empties its waters into the Colorado, about thirty miles from the turn. On either side of the San Saba, the whole length of this singularly straight course, stretch afar, north and south, vast open prairies, covered with rich luxuriant grass and flowers; as fine grazing grounds as are to be found in the world.

The river is lined on each side with towering bottom-timber, moss-draped and vine-covered; while beneath, the undergrowth is dense, and mingled with curious cacti and torturing thorny shrubs. Here and there, through it, are narrow paths, formed by buffalo and mustangs; these animals entering, to quench their thirst, in line, one after another.

Even at noontide, the sun never penetrates these dense shades, except at intervals; and consequently it is comparatively cool within the timber, even in the hottest days of the year.

The waters teem with fish, and that greatly prized delicacy to a borderman, the soft-shell turtle, with its long snake-like neck and head.

Myriads of bright-plumaged birds, fill the woods with their joyous songs by day; while the hoot of the owl, and the flute-like notes of the mocking-bird of Mexico are heard at night—the latter, in pleasant contrast to the shrieking of panthers and howling of wolves.

An earthly paradise, was and is the border of the Rio San Saba.

The description given is that of two decades past, and it remains the same, with the exception that the mustang and buffalo are now few and far between, and the shriek of the panther far less frequently breaks the night.

It was in the spring of 1859 that a small wagon-train, consisting of six white-tilted "prairie schooners," each drawn by eight Spanish mules, advanced slowly around the bend in the San Saba, from the direction of the Colorado, and continued west, near to and parallel with the timber.

The sun was just sinking in the west, a great round ball of sanguine hue, its power, as well as its heat, curtailed by a thick haze, peculiar to the latitude at that hour.

In the first wagon were four negro women, with their children, the latter a dozen in number, and nearly all quite small; the mules being driven by the husbands of these women, who,

mounted upon one of the "wheelers," drove with a single rein, as was common on the border.

A glance into the remaining three wagons would have revealed the fact that they were laden with supplies of all kinds, as well as household furniture and agricultural implements.

A hundred yards in advance of these wagons, rode two men, perfect contrasts in appearance, dress, and manner.

One of these men was tall, robust, and commanding in mien, and straight as an arrow, although he could not be less than sixty years of age.

His hair, and long, thick, flowing beard were white as the driven snow, his face was ruddy, his eyes blue, and his countenance agreeable to look upon. He was evidently a giant in strength, and had a decidedly military bearing. He was clad in a serviceable suit of gray mixed homespun, and was belted with Colt's revolvers and bowie, while a Sharpe's carbine hung at his saddle-born.

He rode an iron-gray horse, of large size, and marked for endurance more than speed.

All in all, he was the picture of an old-time Southern gentleman, and such he was, being, as one who might have met the train would have supposed, the owner of it and of the slaves.

His companion, like the horse he rode, was most peculiar, to say the least.

He was a man of medium stature, with but little flesh upon his bones; his skin, deep-tanned by sun and a thousand camp-fires to the hue of that of a Mexican.

He had a sharp nose, beetling brows, and thin beard; but the most noticeable feature was the absence of one. His left eye was missing, and the deep cavity that remained was more comical than disagreeable to observe.

This singular and angular-looking being was clothed in much soiled and tattered buckskin breeches, and a dirty blue woolen shirt, open at the neck; an old and battered black sombrero and rough boots completing his attire.

A brace of old-style Colt's army "sixes," and a huge bowie, were sustained about his waist by a strap, that had evidently been a piece of mule's harness. These, with a Sharpe's carbine and a bullet-pouch, made up his outfit in the way of arms.

The horse was in perfect keeping with the rider and, strange to say, had like him but one eye; but the animal was large and long-limbed, and was evidently a beast that could make a long and fast run, did occasion require it.

The first man, whom we have described, was Major Simon La Coste, an old soldier of the Texan and Mexican wars, in the service of the Lone Star Republic before annexation, and also a volunteer in the war between the United States and Mexico later on.

Having previously settled in a section of Texas, where he had lost large numbers of cattle and horses by a protracted drought, besides meeting with many other reverses in business, the major had sold out, "pulled up stakes," and resolved to establish a home on the San Saba, of which he had heard most flattering reports.

His herds of stock he had caused to be driven

slowly westward, and they were now some fifty miles in the rear of his wagon-train.

It is needless, however, to explain further as to the major's past life and future hopes. All that will be revealed, as the narrative progresses.

The companion of the old soldier was none other than "Single-Eye," a celebrated ranger and scout of the Lone Star State, who had been engaged as guide for the "outfit," but who had protested, every mile for the last ten leagues, against proceeding further, asserting most emphatically that the major was a "headstrong fool," to peril the lives of his slaves and family by advancing beyond the junction of the San Saba and Rio Colorado.

All this, however, was without avail.

For full a hundred yards had the rearmost wagon proceeded up the river, after rounding the bend, when a Conestoga wagon, drawn by four mules hove in view, on their trail. This was driven by a negro lad, some fourteen years of age.

On the hinder seat of this wagon was a rosy-cheeked matron, the major's wife, and beside her a hatchet-faced woman, the maiden sister of the old soldier. Both ladies had a decidedly worried air.

The name of the soured spinster was Lavina La Coste, familiarly known as "Aunt Lavine."

It was evident that the anxious look on the faces of the ladies was not due to fear. It was rather one of deep concern, in regard to some one of their party who was not yet visible.

Around the bend, easterly, the river wound in many an abrupt turn, forming in some cases quite large spaces of clear grass-grown coves—if we may so call them—surrounded, except at the entrance, by towering trees. Into one of these natural flower gardens, we must now ask the reader to follow us; something like half a mile on the back trail from the wagons.

Lovely indeed is the scene—a mimic Eden—and there is one angel at least within its confines.

In the middle of the open space stands a milk-white pony, idly cropping the flowers and grass, and at times pricking its ears forward, then backward, and to-sing its head quickly upward, as if some sound warned it of danger.

Upon the back of this pony sat a most beautiful girl of some sixteen summers.

Of *petite* form, with long and wavy golden hair, which hung free and unconfined below her waist; with light-blue eyes and a complexion like the blush-rose—such was Lula La Coste, the fair daughter of the gallant major.

There was an exquisite refinement, a loveliness that was almost unearthly, manifest at the first glance of the little beauty, whose pensive air now enhanced her ethereal appearance.

Wholly wrapt was she in contemplating and admiring the beauties of her surroundings, betraying an artistic taste that was in consonance with her own loveliness; as was also the grace of her every motion as at times she listlessly tossed her head to throw back the stray tresses of gold which fell over her brow by the impatient motions of her pony.

The fair girl was clad in a dark-blue riding-habit, and a hat, trimmed with the same color

and decorated with prairie flowers, was held in her hand. She held also a silver-mounted riding-whip, but the reins hung free upon her pony's neck.

Thus sat Lula La Coste for fully five minutes, gazing at different points of the timber. Then she glanced down at the flowers that peeped from the grass, in evident admiration at so much that was new and strange to her.

The pony showed signs of a rapid if not a long gallop, but its panting had somewhat subsided at the end of the time designated, the maiden having evidently bated as much to rest the pony as for any other object.

Soon she became aware of the darkening of the bend and the approach of night.

A huge, gaunt wolf darted from the undergrowth for several yards toward her, and then slunk back again with an angry howl.

With a half-stifled outcry of fear and dread, her lovely face paling, Lula clutched the reins as the howl of the wolf broke upon her ears; but there was little need, for the pony gave a snort, and whirling half about, shot toward the narrow entrance of the horseshoe-shaped space, nearly unseating its fair rider.

She gazed backward with bated breath, toward the point where the wolf had appeared and disappeared, in dread apprehension; but she was suddenly called upon to again clutch at the saddle and the mane of her little steed, for the beast made an abrupt halt, rearing upon its hind hoofs, its ears pointing forward, and snorting wildly, while the animal trembled in every limb.

The face of Lula La Coste became ghastly as death, and her features contorted in fearful horror.

She strove to shriek aloud, but the effort was vain.

Across the open space was stretched a line of fierce, paint-bedaubed Indians, mounted upon prancing, half-wild mustangs, and now shooting glances of wonder, bordering upon superstitious awe, at the angelic girl who with difficulty retained her seat in the saddle, so frantic with terror was her milk-white pony, its violent rearing and prancing causing the long, golden hair of Lula to fly wildly around her slight and graceful form.

Thus the snake-like eyes of the hideous savages remained fixed upon her.

It was a strange scene. A being seemingly too pure, too beautiful, too angelic for earth thus confronted with such a sight of horror—her escape cut off by a line of most demoniac-looking warriors of a hostile race, and less of earth, in face and expression, than of the infernal regions.

CHAPTER II.

GONE FROM THEIR GAZE.

WHITE as a statue of marble was Lula La Coste; her eyes starting from their sockets, in dumb terror at the sight of the horde of hideous braves that barred her exit from the bend, thus cutting her off from her father and mother and from all hope.

Paralyzed and incapable of thought and motion was the fair girl, her brain for the time be-

numbed; otherwise she would have fainted, and fallen upon the flower-bedecked sward.

Not a word was spoken among the grim warriors, neither did any make a motion; each holding firm to the jaw-strap to keep in control, as far as was possible, their wild-eyed steeds.

All seemed so deeply impressed that neither spoke to his neighbor.

The white pony seemed to have lost that power of reasoning which had caused it to fly from the vicinity of the wolf; its snorts and prancing and trembling proving its extreme terror at the strange sight and the strange scent that had so suddenly greeted its eyes and nostrils.

It seemed an age to Lula that her pony faced the hellish horde; she, meanwhile, being incapable of making the slightest movement or exertion to guide the animal from the spot.

But suddenly it seemed to comprehend that it was in its power to fly, and whirling half-about, it bounded toward the swell of the bend.

At the same instant the spell upon Lula was broken and she gave utterance to a piercing cry that caused her pony to spring forward with increased velocity.

As the animal whirled, "ughs" and "waughs" issued in deep, guttural tones from many a throat; at the same time quirts hissed through the air and cut with torturing whacks about the hams of the mustangs that now bounded into the air.

On, like demons let loose, the hoofs of their animals flying through the tall grass and flowers, cutting the stems from the roots and flinging them afar on all sides, so terrific was their speed, came the horde of mounted braves.

On, without a yell or whoop breaking from their savage throats; naught except the rattle of the arrows in their dry buffalo-skin quivers, the tinkle of the silver trinkets in their hair and upon their leggins, the continuous "swish" of hoofs through the tall grass and the snapping of thousands of stems, which resembled the rush and crackling of the flames of a burning prairie—sounds that curdled the blood in the veins of the poor girl and which seemed to her the taunting whispers of Death, and the rattle of teeth in his fleshless skull—giving warning of their march.

Vain, however, were the frantic efforts of the red braves; in vain were the torturing quirts applied, for the white pony was terrified and bent every muscle in the race to escape the strange and dread objects in its rear.

Well knew poor Lula that the run was hopeless, but she was powerless to control the frightened beast.

Ahead there were only the dense, dark shades, and beyond that leafy screen the dark rolling river; although how far beyond, she knew not.

Lula realized that the pony would reach and plunge into the undergrowth before the Indians could prevent it; and she clutched at the animal's mane, turned her eyes heavenward, and cried out from her inmost soul:

"Father in Heaven! Look down upon and preserve Thy child! Save me, oh, save poor Lula!"

The next instant with a snort of mingled re-

lief and fright the pony plunged madly into the undergrowth toward the river.

Lula, expecting every moment to have her brains dashed out against a limb, closed her eyes and muttered whispered prayers in the extremity of her terror.

On crashed the pony, yet the maiden dared not open her eyes.

On, in the rear, dashed a score or more of snorting mustangs, amid the whisk of limbs and branches, and the cracking of twigs and bushes.

On, until the poor girl could no longer keep her eyes closed.

A fascination that she could not resist, a consciousness that some dread danger was in her immediate front, although she could not account for the belief, forced her to open her eyes; knowing, or believing without a doubt, that death in a horrid form, or a worse fate, was coming fast behind her, and yet impressed most strongly and forcibly that the same threatened her in front.

To the surprise and joy of the poor maiden, although she could not tell why, the view gave her relief. The upper disk of the red sun became suddenly revealed to her vision; the opposite side of the river at this point, for a short distance—evidently the path of a cyclone—being clear of timber.

In the excitement and terror that ruled her, Lula lost all thought of the river, however; her brain being filled with dread and horror at the sounds of pursuit so close behind her, thus recalling to her mind the hideous horde who had barred her way of escape from the bend, and who were now in hot pursuit of her.

For the moment she forgot the chilling sensations, the strange emotions that had caused her to open her eyes, believing death to be directly in front of her; the next, however, the same was recalled, flashing like lightning through her mind, for before and beneath her, not more than twenty feet distant, ran the Rio San Saba, the waters turned to seeming blood by the farewell rays of the setting sun, the opposite bank being low.

A fringe of bushes lined the edge before her, which prevented the pony from observing the river, but over which its rider could see.

Instinctively the affrighted maiden threw her whole weight backward upon the reins, her eyes starting in terror, her face the pallor of death; the Indians being, for the instant, banished from her mind. But all her strength, all her efforts were futile; for, the next instant, the pony, at terrific speed, sprung into and through the bushes, shooting out over the bank, and then, with a far-sounding plunge, throwing the waters upward in a shower of blood-like spray. Then poor Lula La Coste and her white pony disappeared beneath the surface of the waters of the San Saba!

A minute afterward, the paint-daubed, eager braves dashed up, and sat their panting mustangs upon the bank, gazing downward in wonder, and then at each other.

And well they might, for naught caught their view except the head of the pony, and its back, as it swam desperately, quartering against the current, toward the opposite bank; there being

but a short space in the same where the animal could gain a footing, and emerge from the river.

Guttural cries of astonishment and superstitious awe burst from one brave, and then another; for well they knew that the "white squaw" ought to have come to the surface at the same time as did the pony.

Some pointed their fingers toward the water, shaking their heads in a negative manner, and then toward the sun; the chief saying, as he made a gesture toward the now setting luminary:

"Squaw got face like white rain that falls in land of Sioux. Got hair like sun. Child of Great Spirit. Gone back to sun. It is good. Coyote is a Comanche chief. When Comanche chief speak, his words good. Coyote has spoken."

Raising his hand in warning, as some of his braves loosened lassoes, sprung from their mustangs, and were about to jump into, and swim the stream, to secure the pony, he added:

"Are my young braves fools, that they go for the little horse of the daughter of the sun?"

"Let them beware, or the bad spirit will follow their trail. The lasso, they would throw at the horse, would fly back, and choke them."

"Our corn would not grow. The buffalo would run to the hunting-grounds of the Sioux. The grass would wither, and the squaws and papposes die, did the little white horse breathe upon one brave of our trail. Coyote has spoken."

The young warriors stole back, their faces filled with superstitious fear and self-condemnation, as they stood, hiding from the view of their chief, behind their mustangs.

As has been mentioned, all had been greatly and strangely impressed by Lulu La Coste; her angelic beauty, golden hair, and milk-white pony, filling them with wonder. But her shriek and flight had banished this to some extent, and all had started, at the orders of their chief, to capture her.

No sooner, however, did they reach the river-bank, knowing that the little steed had bounded over it, and then seen it swim to the opposite shore, and disappear in the undergrowth beyond the open space through which the sun had shot its farewell rays—no sooner did they see this, than all their superstition was reawakened, and increased tenfold.

Certain it was, that the white squaw had been upon the white pony when the animal made the plunge, and just as certain was it that she had disappeared, leaving no trace.

Had she fallen into the stream, she would have arisen to the surface, with the pony.

Thus reasoned the red-men.

A few guttural orders, issued in a low and guarded tone from the chief, and instantly all the braves sprung from their mustangs; four of the number leading twice as many horses on the back trail toward the bend, whence the chase had started, and soon returning for as many more animals.

Then the chief stationed braves up and down the stream, ordering them to seat themselves upon the bank and watch the waters; thus proving and betraying the fact that he did not believe

his own assertions in regard to the disappearance of the "white squaw."

The sun sunk, the red glow died away, and still the Comanche braves sat on the bank of the Rio San Saba, their eyes fixed upon the waters, but guided more by sense of hearing than sight, for all around was dark and the river was inky black.

Suddenly, from below them, shot a piercing shriek, and every brave sprung to his feet, the chief as well, and ran as though the fiends were in chase of them.

Upon reaching their horses, they equipped the animals quickly, sprung into their saddles, and then hastened at headlong speed out from the bend and up the river.

All at once Coyote made halt, giving a signal yell as he alighted from his mustang.

Eager braves followed his example, uttering ejaculations of joy and exultation as they saw, plainly defined, the trail of the wagon-train.

The mystery of the white squaw's being in that far-away and isolated bend of the San Saba was now explained. The wonder and dread of the Comanches was at an end.

They had struck the trail of the white foe!

CHAPTER III.

RATTLESNAKE, THE TONKAWAY.

HAD one been on the outer edge of the timber of the Rio San Saba, one mile from the bend, northeasterly toward the Colorado and on the western side of the stream, a most impressive and terrible sight might have been seen, some two hours previous to sunset, and a little less time from the arrival of the wagon-train at the point where the travelers have been introduced to the reader.

And a witness there was to the scene, and one who will be a prominent actor in our little frontier drama, and whom we will not describe.

At the time designated, namely, two hours before the sun had set, there stood, one mile from the bend, in the very edge of the border of undergrowth, his arms folded, his black, piercing eyes scanning the plain to the west, over which the blood-red sun cast a fiery glow through the hazy heat, an Indian.

He had three flaunting eagle-feathers in his beaded fillet, which proclaimed him a chief. He stood nearly six feet in his moccasins, and was as straight as a forest pine, proud and noble in mien, his features differing much from those of the generality of his people.

His nose, instead of being wide and flat, was slender, and more of the Grecian type than aught else, and his nostrils distended at every breath, like those of a blooded race-horse when brought up to the start. His eyes flashed with furious hatred and his fingers clutched tightly about his arms, as if he thus controlled himself from action, as he gazed over the plain; a thirst for blood and revenge in his eagle eye, his lips parted as though the war-cry of his tribe trembled on his tongue.

His impatience and the strength of will necessary to control him, were betrayed by the frequent changing of his weight from one limb to the other; casting, as he did so, the eased foot forward with lightning-like swiftness, showing a

suppleness and motion which resembled that of a panther.

Naked from the waist up, he stood in his closely-fitting leggings of buckskin, and his moccasins. These were beaded and fringed in an exquisite manner, and were evidently newly bound.

His leggings were held in place by a richly-beaded belt, which also sustained a long scalping knife and a Colt's army six-shooter; while leaning against a bush near at hand was a Sharpe's carbine.

Upon the broad bronzed breast of this chief was a perfect representation of a rattlesnake, coiled for deadly spring. This was done in different colored pigments, while bars of black paint and vermilion, with fine lines of blue, covered face and brow.

His fillet confined his long, raven-black hair behind his ears, the heavy locks hanging below his waist, and being ornamented with tiny silver trinkets.

All in all, he was most impressive and commanding, as well as noble in appearance—a very prince of the prairie, a bronze Apollo.

In his rear, but a few paces, browsing the tender bushes, stood a magnificent black horse, with arched neck and wide-flowing mane, tail, and forelock; flossy and silky in appearance, with large bright eyes, and nostrils that distended widely at times, as it snuffed the air suspiciously, gazing at its master, tossing its head impatiently, and pawing up the green sward.

Well suited to each other seemed the horse and its owner; the animal showing points for great speed and endurance, with a show of fire and vim besides, that was remarkable.

In a small, natural, clear space stood the Indian chief and his steed, but a thin fringe of bushes growing between them and the open plain; the long festoons of Spanish moss depending from the limbs of the huge trees and mingling with the eagle-feathers of the chief, while the horse at times reached upward and tore huge masses of it from the branches, and stamped them viciously beneath its hoofs.

Kind reader, we have thus endeavored to describe one of the most celebrated Indian scouts and trailers in all Texas—none other than Rattlesnake, the Tonkaway; a chief ranked only by Old Placador, who, as well as all his warriors, was friendly to Sam Houston and the Lone Star State.

And they continued so, even after they had been removed from their hunting-grounds in Texas to a reservation on the Ouachita River in the Indian Nation.

But what is the view, upon the far-stretching plain to the west, which holds the attention and excites the fury and thirst for revenge in the breast of the Tonkaway?

We will tell you.

It is a scene that would appall the stoutest heart to look upon, even from a position of perfect safety.

The western sky is filled with a lurid glow, the air with a fiery haze, and the sun seems a huge ball of blood-red hue, slowly sinking, and appearing as though swelled and inflamed with anger, as its reign for the day draws near an end.

And, in the fiery light, which seems like the glow from the far-off gates of some Inferno, skimming over the prairie toward the timber of the San Saba, and in the direction of the Tonkaway chief; on like a horde of demons who appeared to have emerged from the seeming fiery world in the west, on at headlong speed come full three-score of Comanche braves—a war-party eager for the blood and scalps of the hardy, venturesome border settlers of the Rio Llano and Rio Colorado!

At first a slowly-moving mass, whose character could only be decided by the glint and glitter of lance-points in the red sunlight; but soon seen in all their hideous paraphernalia of savage war, and most terrible to contemplate.

On they came, at terrific speed, their long hair flying in the wind of their speed afar out behind them; the scalps, upon lance, and shield, and leggings, fluttering as well.

Bent forward in their saddles, the manes of their half-wild mustangs flying in their paint-daubed faces, from which flash their black, snake-like eyes; bars of vermilion drawn along their breasts and arms, with lines of white gypsum between, causing them to appear more hideous, horrible and unearthly—thus on they dash!

Their buffalo-skin quirts hiss through the air, and about the panting beasts, which spring, with snort and far-reaching bound at the torturing lash; their hoofs fast flying through the prairie-grass, causing a swishing sound, which, with the continuous thud of hundreds of hoofs, resembled the rush and moan of an approaching "norther."

Thus on dashed the Comanche war-party; each tongue silent as death itself, each bent upon urging on his foam-bespattered steed, and taking no notice of his fellows.

Straight as the flight of an arrow from a bow, the war-fiends galloped—straight toward the point where stands, screened by the narrow line of undergrowth, Rattlesnake, the Tonkaway. The latter now clutches his rifle, slips his revolver around to the point on his belt, cocks the carbine, and holding the weapon ready, braced himself, his left foot forward, desperate and daring—scorn and hatred, the most intense, blazing in his eagle eye.

Will the Tonkaway stand thus, and brave almost certain death?

The flash of eye, the poise of form, and the grip of weapon, prove that he will, that he scorns to fly.

Some must fall before his deadly aim, but he will be overwhelmed by numbers; by scores of his foes, who detest him for affiliating with the whites, and hate him as a renegade to his people.

Surely the time seems to have arrived when the death-cry of Rattlesnake is to sound in the ears of his overjoyed enemies, and echo through the natural arches of the timber on the Rio San Saba, where oft his wild war-whoop has rung in victorious intonations.

Thus it really seemed.

Death or torture appeared to be his doom.

Already could he see the glitter of the snake-like eyes of the Comanches, seeming to bore into the undergrowth; practicing no caution in their

headlong approach, fearing no ambuscade, secure in their strength.

Thus on, until the very panting of the mustangs was distinctly heard by the daring Tonkaway; then, up to his shoulder he brought his carbine; but at the very instant that his finger was about to press the trigger—when life and death, to others as well as himself, hung on a moment—the Comanche war-party all jerked jaw-straps, at a signal whoop from their chief, and swooped like a flock of birds southward, rushing past the covert of the plumed chief, rustling the very twigs and leaves in his front by the wind created by their terrific speed, so close did they pass to the fringe of undergrowth.

Down came the carbine of the Tonkaway, resting against his thigh; more of disappointment mingled with the hate and vengeful fury that had been engendered by the sight of his foes so near to him, than aught else.

Then he bent forward, peering up the river, soon to see the war-party all jerk their mustangs to a halt simultaneously.

In two minutes more, not a Comanche was within view, all having disappeared within the shades, some five hundred yards below the lurking place of Rattlesnake.

The eyes of Tonkaway glittered with exultation and satisfaction, and he quickly secreted his carbine in a hollow log near at hand; then removing the jaw-strap from his horse, and loosening the saddle-girth, he grasped the muzzle of the animal, and blew into its nostrils, keeping his eyes upon those of the noble beast. The latter, as soon as it was released, rubbed its nose against that of its red master as he tightened his belt, and drew his scalping-knife, circling the blade around his plumed head.

As he did so, the Tonkaway gazed skyward, the war-whoop of his tribe very nearly bursting on the air; being suppressed only by a great effort of his will.

Then, with a willowy, supple, panther-like movement, Rattlesnake glided, half-bent, through the undergrowth, toward the point where the Comanche war-party had entered the timber.

Had our red friend proceeded over the river, and through the timber to the easterly border of the same, he would by gazing down the San Saba, in the direction of the Colorado, have discovered a sight which would have greatly changed his plans; and would without doubt, have taken steps, which would also have greatly changed the course of events connected with others who are to figure in this narrative.

But this was not to be.

Fate decreed that the wagon-train should pass up the San Saba on the easterly side of the same, unperceived by the Tonkaway, as well as by the Comanches who were on the west side of the stream.

Had Rattlesnake known that his white pard, Single-Eye the scout, was so near and guiding a Texan, with his family and slaves, up the Rio San Saba, he would have warned them of the presence of the hostile Comanches.

As it was, matters were tending toward much torture of mind, and tragic happenings, all of which might have been averted, had the Ton-

away chief struck through the timber eastward, instead of advancing up the river bottom to inspect the camp of his hated foes the Comanches.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE ALERT.

It was some time before Rattlesnake gained a position, from which he could view the Comanche camp; he climbing a moss-draped tree for that purpose.

He decided immediately that his foes had travelled without halt, from the rising of the sun.

The conditions of their animals indicated this; but a stronger proof was the fact that the Comanches, when he reached his "lookout," were tearing, like famished wolves, half-cooked meat, which they devoured ravenously; one of the extra mustangs, which they had in lead, having been slain to afford them a feast.

So famished were the braves, that not only had they neglected to post sentinels, but they had not, so far as the Tonkaway could determine, sent out spies to inspect the plain to the east of the river.

This indicated that they had had some spy, or spies, down country, within a day or two, and were confident that there was no body of men in the vicinity, strong enough in numbers to cope with them.

Rattlesnake resolved in his mind, however, that this war-party should come to grief through his efforts.

He decided to keep an eye on them, and not only to warn the settlers to the south, but also to hasten to the camp of a party of rangers, whom he knew to be on the Rio Llano, or to Fort Mason, and guide thence a detachment of troops on their trail.

However, it was not in the Tonkaway's "make up," as far as a thirst for revenge and hatred went, to allow his foes to proceed without losing a few scalps, which he vowed should hang at his belt.

He would let them know, as he had often done before, that he was on their trail; that he had not forgotten the fact that they had tortured his beautiful squaw at the stake, by ordering their hags to stone her to death, and that they had secured his only pappoose to the tail of a wild horse, to be dragged over the plain, until naught but bones remained of it.

They should know, to their cost, that he had not forgotten his vow.

They should hear the war-cry of the Tonkaway chief, mingled with the death-yell of many of their braves, before they reached the log lodges of the Texasos.

All that Rattlesnake had suffered at the hands of the Comanches was now brought forcibly to his mind, and he was furious for revenge. He knew that this party was headed by Coyote, the most vindictive and merciless foe to the Tonkaways and the whites in the Comanche nation.

Not until this moment did Rattlesnake think of the possibility of whites being on the east plain; and he berated himself mentally for allowing his thirst for revenge to cause him to

neglect having inspected the prairie toward the Rio Llano.

But, it was now too late for regrets, and he quickly descended from his perch, stealing through the undergrowth in a cautious and noiseless manner, until reaching the river; when, again mounting into a tree, he made his way, through the entwined branches, to a huge pecan, on the opposite side of the stream. Then descending, he proceeded, as before, on the trail of the small party of Comanches, who had left the main camp.

Rattlesnake well knew the lay of the land, and he soon left the trail, in order to strike the swell of the bend, and enter the open space which has been described, as the scene of the fright and flight of Lula La Coste.

The Tonkaway believed, from the course taken by the Comanches, that he could enter the natural "open," and, by a fast run, gain a view of the plain before his foes had cleared the wood to the north, and on his right. However, he was fated to meet with a most astounding surprise; for, as he reached the margin of the bushes, he perceived Lula, as we have described, seated upon her pony.

Even the Tonkaway, who had seen many beautiful women, who had mingled for years with the Texans, was dumfounded at the sight of the lovely, golden-haired maiden; and, although he was confident that she was in danger of discovery and capture by the Comanches, he neglected warning her, so impressed was he by her extraordinary beauty, and so astonished at seeing her thus alone in such a wild place, so far from any of the border ranches.

He knew that she must have friends near, possibly a wagon-train was in the vicinity; and, if so, it was doomed, for the Comanches would discover either the trail or the camp.

Before the chief had recovered himself, the maiden's pony half whirled, and galloped in fright from the middle of the "open" toward the neck of the bend; and then it was that Rattlesnake saw the warriors under Coyote station themselves across the exit to the plain, and bar the pony's way.

Most furious was the Tonkaway at this moment, but he had little time to consider the situation, or to form plans that would favor the poor girl's rescue, for the pony turned about and galloped headlong directly toward him, the Comanches in hot chase.

In an instant the Tonkaway sprung toward the river in frantic bounds, reasoning that the fair girl would reach it ahead of her pursuers.

As yet he had formed no plan, but his mind was busy as he tore through the undergrowth. He saw that the Comanches had parted and were speeding on each side of the bend.

This proved to him that the white pony would be forced to keep a direct course to the river, and Rattlesnake, upon thus reasoning, decided on his course of action, although there seemed no possible way in which he could be of the least benefit to the maiden in preventing her capture.

Running as fast as was possible under the circumstances, the Tonkaway soon reached the river-bank at the very point where a few mo-

ments later the pony, with its mistress, sprung into the stream.

He saw at once that in its headlong flight, the little steed would be prevented from seeing the river by the line of bushes, and would bound over the bank.

Quickly the chief let himself down by a vine to the water, and drawing his revolver, held the weapon at arm's length over his head as he dropped into the river, the water at the bank being up to his neck.

He now perceived that there was a cave-like opening at the base of the bank behind him, where the clay had fallen into the stream. This was sufficiently large for two or three persons to secrete themselves.

Entering this little cavern, Rattlesnake listened intently, his practiced ear enabling him to determine almost the exact distance between the pursued and the pursuers.

The Tonkaway now formed a scheme in his fertile brain for the rescue of the young girl, which would, he knew, jeopardize his own life. To this, however, he gave but a flitting thought.

Did he but work quickly, and with skill, there was a possibility of success, although at great risk.

Before, however, he had time to well digest his plan and brace himself for action, the white pony shot through the bushes, over the bank, and into the river, with a terrible plunge.

Barely had the little steed struck the surface, when, with a sudden plunge, the Tonkaway chief shot from the bank, beneath the surface, clutching Lula and jerking her from the struggling pony. He then swam under water with quick and powerful movements, knowing that his own life and more than life to the maiden might depend upon a single stroke of his one arm.

He reached the cave-like opening in the bank, just as the Comanches galloped up overhead and the white pony struck out, panting and snorting, for the other side of the river.

Seating himself, Rattlesnake held Lula reverently in his arms; she being motionless as a corpse, and as devoid of sense. The Tonkaway waited patiently for her to revive, yet dreading that moment too much to hasten her recovery; for he feared she would, upon beholding him, shriek out in her fright, and thus betray both herself and him.

Not that he feared his enemies. Just the opposite.

He scorned them and defied them; feeling sure in his mind that he could evade capture easily, as he had many times before.

But the chief well knew what would be the fate of the fair girl in his arms, if captured; and he had not the slightest thought of deserting her.

He now understood the reason why the Comanches had sat their mustangs, when they could have dashed in and surrounded the white maiden, when she was on the plain. It was because they had been so greatly impressed by her strange unearthly beauty.

The words of Coyote, the Comanche chief now reached the ear of Rattlesnake proving that his reasonings had been correct. The war-party believed the maiden to have been a daughter of the sun, and that she had flown through the air to that luminary.

The Tonkaway now believed that he could under the cover of night, escape from the vicinity of his foes; indeed he was confident of success.

He heard the horses, as they were led away; and from the guttural ejaculations of his foes he knew that they intended watching the waters.

For some time Rattlesnake sat, pondering upon the mysterious presence of the fair girl at such a dangerous point, and what he should do, should she, upon her recovery, make an outcry.

While he thus reasoned, Lulu slowly opened her eyes, and as they became fastened upon the painted face of him who held her in his arms, her senses returned to her.

She believed that she had been captured by the red fiends who had pursued her, and that she was now reclining in the arms of a Comanche.

At first her tongue was paralyzed, and incapable of utterance, as she fixed her eyes upon the face of the chief. Then she gave one heart-rending shriek and again relapsed into insensibility.

Rattlesnake clutched bowie and "six-shooter," after seating his fair charge on a projection of earth; then sprung erect, braced for conflict, when, to his joy and relief, he heard the Comanches running from the bank into the timber.

Coyote and his braves evidently thought that the "white squaw" was in some way connected with either the Good Spirit or the Bad Spirit—for the cry that they had heard undoubtedly proceeded from her—and they believed that she still remained in the depths of the river.

Hence their precipitous flight.

All this the Tonkaway readily comprehended.

He well knew the superstitions of his race.

Their dread and horror of the locality, however, the Tonkaway felt sure would soon be dissipated, and then they would return.

The totally unexpected cry which came apparently from the depths of the San Saba, rendered more savage and unearthly from being uttered within the cave-like opening in the bank, had startled the watchers, and filled them with a superstitious terror for the time.

But they would soon return.

Of this Rattlesnake was confident.

Not only this, but he felt sure that the shriek must have been heard in the main camp, which was but a short distance down the river; and, securing his revolver by a buckskin cord to the top of his head, the Tonkaway chief quickly swam across the river with his fair charge, and mounting the bank opposite his recent lurking-place, he disappeared in the undergrowth.

Rattlesnake's first trail was on that of the white pony.

Of his second, we shall hear more in a later chapter.

CHAPTER V.

SINGLE-EYE, THE SCOUT.

"I HESN'T see'd, no 'sign,' major, this hyer side o' ther San Saba; but thet doesn't go ter prove thet thar ain't hellyuns 'round. Fact air, ther red scum promernades the perrarers hyer-bouts purty permiscu's, ther bestest part o' ther time; fer thar's plenty o' game and fish, an' a

mustang kin fill his belly wi' grass in a ormighty short time, if not sooner.

"Dang my pictur', ef I doesn't feel sorter bilious 'bout perceedin' on this-a-ways, with weemin folkses, es I hes spit out more'n onc't sence sun-up.

"I'm inclernated ter think thet ye'r' es contrairy an' cross-grained es a gov'ment mule, er yer'd ha' done es I 'vised yer, an' squatted on ther Llano, nigh ter Fort Mason; though yer wouldn't be safe even thar-a-ways, fer ther painted sculpers stompeded plum within a half shute o' ther barracks las' fall, an' tuck in a heap o' humans, right in sight o' ther blue-coats.

"I'm reckonin' yer'll wish yer'd tuck ther ole man's 'vice, ef ther hellyuns sh'u'd skupe in yer weemin an' niggers; 'speshly ef ther purty leetle gal, Lula, sh'u'd turn up missin'."

Thus spoke Single-Eye, as he rode by the side of Major La Coste, at the head of the wagon-train, as described in our first chapter.

At that very moment, Lula La Coste was sitting upon her white pony, confronted by a score of Comanches, half a mile down the river, on the back trail.

"I really believe you are bilious, friend Single-Eye," said the major. "For my part, I have thus far seen no indications of danger. One would not suppose there had even been an Indian in this section; and every mile we have progressed, since leaving the Colorado, the land has improved.

"This is a perfect earthly Paradise, and I do not believe I shall be molested if I locate in one of these horse-shoe bends. The general course of the river is from west to east; but there are short and abrupt bends, within which one can build strong log houses, and laugh at the Indians should they make a formal call.

"My negroes are all brave and trustworthy, and I have arms and ammunition in plenty."

"Ya-as, but yer can't take yer stock inter ther houses; and ther cussed reds 'll run 'em all off, dead sure an' sart'in!"

"I can corral the cattle nights until the Indians have been driven further west. Why are you so apprehensive? There has been no raid this year, that I have heard of."

"Thet's jist the reason yer kin 'spect ther cantankerous cusses ter lunge down this-a-way.

"I tell yer, major, I won't be 'sponsible fer ther outfit, an' I hain't bin, since we left ther Colorado. Dang my gizzard, ef I can't smell Injuns, an' so does my nag, Skip-lively!"

Then, bending forward, the scout addressed his horse:

"Yer doesn't keer ter go no funder wi' ther weemin—does yer, Skip?"

The beast shook his head, in a quick and decisive manner.

"Doesn't yer think thar's reds galervantin' 'bout within a day's ride, eager fer bleed an' ha'r?"

Skip lively bobbed his head up and down.

Major La Coste roared with laughter.

"Quit thet, major! Quit thet, ef yer hes any 'gards fer yer folkses back in ther waggins.

"Dang hit! Yer'd bring ther reds down on ter we-uns jist a-b'ilin'. Ef thar's any within a mile they'd hear yer. I hes gi'n yer fa'r

warnin' o' what yer mought 'spect; but yer w'u'd come up ther San Saba, an' ef anythin' bilious does turn up, hit's not ole Single-Eye's fault.

"I'll skute 'cross ther drink, soon es we gits things straight in camp, an' smell 'roun' fer 'sign.' Thar's game, fish, wood, water an' grass hyer, ontill yer can't rest—dang my gizzard, ef ther' ain't!

"Hit's a ormighty mean white man that can't slap up a ranch hyer, without bein' liable ter lose his ha'r nex' day. But whar in thunderation's ther leetle gal? I doesn't fix my peeper on ter her. Er ther white pony, nuth'er!"

"She's probably lingering on the trail, gathering flowers," suggested the major, looking back.

It was evident, from the expression of the old gentleman's face, that the oft-repeated warnings of the scout had begun to have their effect upon him; or else the absence of his much-loved daughter gave him some anxiety, heretofore unfelt.

Agreeably to Single-Eye's orders, the wagon-train now turned into a bend almost the exact counterpart of the one in which Lula La Coste had met with such a startling adventure but a few moments previous.

The wagons were placed in the middle of the clear space, forming a square, the harness was removed quickly from the mules, and soon the animals were rolling in the grass to cool their heated and perspiring skins.

A minute after, the Conestoga wagon came rattling into the bend, and the major, who had dismounted and delivered his horse to one of his slaves, walked up to greet his wife and sister and assist them from the wagon.

The old scout superintended the placing of the "schooners," and gave directions in regard to the camp-fires, and to getting the arms in order, that they might be available in the event of an attack.

"Where in the name of wonder is Lula?"

Thus inquired her father, impatiently and anxiously, as the wagon approached.

"That is a question I should like much to be able to answer," returned his wife, manifesting no little apprehension as she spoke.

"We have not seen her for some time. The last we saw of her she was riding near the timber around the big bend. I feel very anxious, and I wish Single-Eye would gallop back and advise her to join us immediately."

"She's a heap too venturesome," put in Aunt Lavine. "When I was a girl I hed to mind my elders. For my part, I've seen flowers and birds enough since we started on this tejus trip to last me for a year; but Lula ain't never satisfied."

"Ef thar'd a big b'ar or a wolf bark at her, or she should hear an Injun holler, I reckon she'd stick a little clos'ter ter the train."

Miss Lavinia La Coste had spent the greater part of her life in the backwoods of Arkansas, and in consequence was not very particular in regard to her manner of expressing herself—a fact which caused Single-Eye to "cotton" to her, her deficiencies in language and expression being considered by the old scout a merit.

"Do not worry," advised the major. "We'll find Lula, never fear! She is fond of galloping free over the prairie, and this is not the first time she has failed to put in an appearance at camping time."

"I know that," agreed Mrs. La Coste, "but I can't help feeling a presentiment of coming evil and disaster, although I cannot explain why."

"Ever since we left the Colorado I have felt that we were going too far from the outer line of settlers; and all those reports of horrible massacres by the Indians have been brought forcibly and plainly to my mind. Do you feel safe here?"

"Perfectly safe," returned the husband. "If the red-men do attack us, we can easily defeat them. Of this I am satisfied. I am an old soldier, you must remember."

"Ya-as," said Single-Eye, dryly, advancing at this moment, followed by Aunt Lavine; "yer may be a old soldjer, an' yit not know nothin' 'bout sarcumventin' red heathen."

"I'm worried 'bout ther leetle gal. Hit won't do fer her ter sling herself 'roun' permiscu's-like, in this hyer locate."

"Don't you think—"

The major was here interrupted by the neighing of a horse, sounding through the timber, apparently from beyond the river.

Single-Eye shot a glance in the major's face.

The latter grew a shade pale, and his lips began to quiver.

"Major," said the old scout, decisively, "I'll chaw bugs fer grub ther nex' six moons, ef thet warn't the pony o' yer leetle gal!"

Thus speaking, Single-Eye remounted, and spurred at once toward the river.

"In Heaven's name, what does it means?" exclaimed Major La Coste.

"Mercy on us! How come the child beyant the river?" burst out Aunt Lavine.

"Oh, Lula! Lula!" cried the agonized mother; "I shall die if anything has happened to her!"

The scout had not passed over half the distance between the wagons and the border of the timber, when the white pony dashed, crashing through the brush into the "open," galloping, with snorts of terror, directly to the wagons, the animal dripping with water.

"My God!" cried Major La Coste; "what has happened to my darling?"

With one piercing shriek Mrs. La Coste sunk senseless on the sward; while a wail of grief and anguish came from the negro women and their children, as they huddled together, in dread apprehension, fearing they knew not what.

Aunt Lavine stood, speechless and motionless; gazing with fixed and stony stare, at the dripping pony of the missing girl.

The teamsters collected together, in muttered consultation, feeling that some dread calamity was about to fall upon them.

All loved and revered Lula, and all felt but too sure that the fair girl had met with some terrible mishap.

For full a minute, Single-Eye sat his horse; having halted instantly, when the pony made its appearance. The old scout notwithstanding his frequent warnings, and the knowledge that Indians were liable to make their appearance at

any moment, was dumfounded, his heart springing to his throat.

Never had he met a human being, who had impressed him so favorably as had Lula La Coste; and he was confident, as soon as he saw the riderless pony, that she had, at least, met some accident.

Not a trace had been seen of Indians on the trip, thus far; and he hoped that the red-skins had nothing to do with the absence of the fair girl.

The old scout dashed up to the major, saying, in a quick, peremptory manner:

"Git ther nigger weemin' and children back inter ther waggin, arm ther teamsters, an' keep an eye open fer bizl"

"Miss Lavine, keep shady wi' ther madam, soon es yer gits her back ter Texas. I'll fetch leetle Lula back, er bu'st up things giner'ly!"

With these words, Single-Eye galloped back to the narrow opening that led from the plain into the camp; but, the next moment he came dashing back at full speed, spurring up to the major, who still stood, dazed and agonized, and unable to plan or act.

The scout cried out:

"Hit's all up, major! Ther red bellyuns air on our trail, an' they hes gut ther leetle gall"

"We-'uns hes ter fight like ther Ole Boy ter save ther weemin an' our own skulps!"

"Boyees," this to the negroes, "git yer shooters, an' stan' firm!"

CHAPTER VI.

A WELCOME CRY.

WHEN Single-Eye galloped over the soft sward of the bottom for the purpose of going on the back trail in search of Lula La Coste, he had but little doubt in his mind as to what had become of her.

He knew that the pony had long been the girl's pet, and that she was complete mistress of the animal, consequently it was unreasonable to suppose that she had been thrown from the saddle.

From the fact that the pony was terribly frightened, and had been in the river, the old scout concluded that an Indian, secreted in the undergrowth, had jerked the maiden from her saddle, and that the startled animal had plunged into the river and swam across.

No wild beasts roamed the bottom at that time of the day that could not have been easily avoided by Lula, and he did not believe she would have ventured into the bottom alone, as she had been warned against so doing.

Had she done so, she must have been forced to it, from some enemies having prevented her escape in any other direction.

Single-Eye therefore checked the speed of his horse, walking the animal slowly to the verge of the outer section of the bend.

One glance along the back trail caused the scout to congratulate himself upon having acted thus cautiously; for, coming slowly around the big bend from the direction of the Colorado, he discovered Coyote and his braves, all bent downward from their saddles, following the trail of the wagons.

There were but some twenty warriors, but the old scout well knew that such a small num-

ber would not be on the war-path. Others could not be far away.

Those within view he did not deem of any consideration, as they could not cope with the well-trained teamsters, the major, and himself.

They could easily be repulsed; but the balance of the war-party, if they were near at hand, as was probable, might, at the sound of fire-arms, attack and massacre them.

As these thoughts flashed through his head, Single-Eye whirled his horse and returned instantly to the camp. Had he lingered a few moments he would have been relieved in mind, for the Comanche chief, after ascertaining the direction taken by the wagons, and knowing that with his present force he could not attack the whites, turned about and ordered his braves to follow. All, therefore, returned at a gallop, first to the point where Lula had plunged into the river, where Coyote ordered a half-dozen braves to inspect the bank on both sides, up and down the stream.

But this inspection gave no clew; and as it was then nearly dark, all proceeded to the main camp.

Instantly every warrior was fired with joy and triumph, as the finding of the trail and the discovery of the white squaw were revealed by their comrades.

At once they prepared themselves and their horses for the expected night-attack; but Coyote the cunning chief, ordered out another half-dozen braves on foot as scouts, to ascertain the location of the camp and the strength of the whites.

Barely had this order been given, when loud on the night air rung the death-yell of a Comanche warrior, causing the remainder of the war-party to gaze at each other in wonder.

Coyote strode into the middle of the camp in fury, and issued a guttural order.

Every brave collected around him, when it was found that two of their number were absent. The six who had been selected as spies, stood apart in a group and instantly the chief pointed toward the south—the direction whence the death-yell had sounded.

The spies quickly darted into the shades, and disappeared on their double errand, to ascertain who had slain their comrade and also the location of the Texans' camp.

They all knew that this was on the further side of the river. It was impossible for the wagons to have crossed the river. But the death-yell had come from the same side on which they were themselves. This was a mystery, as was also the disappearance of the white squaw.

There were, then, enemies on both sides.

The question was, what was their number?

Coyote could do nothing but await the return of the spies.

The latter had not placed fifty yards between them and their camp when again a blood-curdling howl of death rung out on the night, evidently but a short distance from the scene of the former tragedy.

This sound caused the spies to halt, struck with wonder and terror.

They had not the slightest idea who or what had thus occasioned the death of their two comrades.

As for Coyote, he was furious.

But the mystery of the death-yells was almost instantly solved; for close following the last rung the war-cry of the Tonkaways, in taunting exultation.

Comanche nature could stand no more.

All were now frantically furious and eager for the fray.

A low signal from the chief, who galloped from the camp caused every brave to follow, all crashing through the undergrowth, fording the river, and taking up the trail of the wagons, in their fierce thirst for revenge.

Well they knew the dreaded Rattlesnake!

After giving his orders for preparing the camp for defense, the old scout, leaving his horse secured to a wagon-wheel, ran back to the opening to ascertain the progress of the red foe on the trail.

To the joy of Single-Eye not a Comanche was in view, and he hastened back to camp.

He knew they might look for an attack before morning.

That Lula was a captive he had no doubt, and he swore to rescue her, and also to save the train, if such were possible.

Hastily improvising a fort, by means of the wagons, he placed the females within it, the mules being driven to a natural "open" in the dense timber some distance up the stream.

Mrs. La Coste lay surrounded by the negro women, in a most deplorable state of mind, low moans constantly issuing from her lips, while Aunt Lavine strove in vain to rally her from the fearful shock she had sustained.

Since the Indians had been reported in the vicinity by Single-Eye, Mrs. La Coste had given up to hopeless despair, for she had not the slightest doubt that her daughter was in the power of those merciless savages.

The negro women and children were simply paralyzed with terror.

The slave teamsters maintained a brave demeanor, desperate at the dangerous position of their wives and little ones; while the old scout, by well-chosen words, encouraged all, as he perfected his arrangements, assisted by the speechless major.

The latter moved about in a mechanical manner, the very personification of despair, anguish, and self-condemnation.

Major La Coste was, indeed, on the borders of insanity.

He had stubbornly disregarded the advice of Single-Eye, and dragged his dear and helpless ones into dangers that he dare not dwell upon, even in thought, and from which there seemed no escape; for the old scout had prepared him for the worst, telling him that there was a large war-party in the vicinity.

As to any attempt being now made to ascertain what had become of Lula, this was out of the question; but it was with great difficulty that Single Eye prevented the major from setting out to search the bottom-timber.

All in all, the old scout had no easy task, to bring anything like order out of the chaotic demoralization of the party; and he was rendered almost hopeless himself, and incapable of reasoning correctly upon the situation of affairs in the camp.

He was obliged to frighten the women and children, who by this time had begun to give vent to their fears, into silence; and, at length, he had everything arranged to his satisfaction.

No sooner had he done this, and torn off a huge chew of "nigger-head," than the moon, slowly rising higher in the heavens, shot its rays over the western tree-tops, and down into the camp; and, at the same time, loud on the night, sounded the death-howl of a Comanche brave, from over the river.

"Dang my cats!" exclaimed the old scout, ejecting a squirt of tobacco-juice.

"Thet's ther last yelp of a Comanche, er I hopes ter be baked wi' dogs, an' fed ter Piute papposes. What in thunderation's up, t'other side ther drink? Things is sorter mixed."

Single-Eye spoke more to himself than to others. Then he listened intently.

The death-howl caused a sudden change in Major La Coste.

His eyes flashed furiously, his form became instantly erect, and he slipped his revolvers and bowie to the front on his belt. Then he clutched his rifle, and also listened intently.

As yet he had neither seen nor heard any Indians, and the fearful howl brought him to a full realization of the peril of himself and his party. He thought of the terrible conflict that was, doubtless, now near at hand.

For a few moments, all within the little wagon-fort was silent as death itself, for all had heard that awful sound—the last howl of an expiring savage.

Thus they remained, until again that terrible yell broke the stillness; this time from a different point.

"Cuss my cats!" exclaimed the old scout in the utmost astonishment and perplexity.

This ejaculation had no sooner left the lips of Single-Eye, however, when the night air was cut by a far-sounding whoop of war, in taunting exultation, quite near at hand.

"Double up an' dang me! Hash me fer cat-fish bait! Somebody hold me er I shill hev a conniption fit. Hit's sich a suddint surprise thet it makes me sick enough ter puke up my knee-pans—durned ef bit don't."

"Dang my 'Merican gizzard ef thet music warn't spit out by my red pard, Rattlesnake, ther Tonk! An' he's a rattler, yer jist kin bet!"

"Major, run this hyer outfit ontill I glides back. Everythin's comin' out hunk—leastways I'm inclernated ter opine thet-a-way. I allers does when I hears ther Tonk whooperee."

With these words, delivered in a hasty and joyous manner, which caused Major La Coste and the negroes the utmost amazement, mingled with relief, Single-Eye leaned his rifle against a bale of goods, and sprung between the tilt and the side of the wagon to the ground outside.

Then on he bounded, like a frightened buck, toward the river, soon disappearing in the timber.

CHAPTER VII.

BROUGHT BACK.

WHEN Lula uttered the piercing shriek at the time she found herself in the arms of a war-painted Indian, it was heard by two braves on

the opposite side the stream, who had strolled from the main camp, up the San Saba, in quest of soft-shelled turtles.

Both ran to ascertain the cause of the sound, one being some distance in the rear of the other, and neither being aware of the other's presence.

The first sight that met the eyes of the foremost was the Tonkaway, bearing Lula La Coste in his arms.

Here was an opportunity to gain a scalp and a captive and to win renown.

Thus thought the Comanche, and he rushed in pursuit.

The second brave saw neither his comrade nor the Tonkaway, but he detected the trails of both in the soft mud, and he also hastened in pursuit.

But this time Rattlesnake knew not which way to go.

He felt positive that there was a party of whites in the near vicinity, and from the fact that the Comanches had passed through the timber to the east plain and had discovered the maiden on the white pony, the Tonkaway reasoned that the whites had made the turn, and proceeded up the river, west, before they had encamped.

In consequence of this decision, our red friend struck through the timber, aiming to cross it some distance above the turn, where he felt that the camp of the maiden's friends must be located.

Hastening as fast as possible, bearing the senseless Lula in his strong arms, carefully as a mother would her child, the chief gained some distance before he halted to listen; ever cunning and suspicious.

He was about to start again, when the rustle of a bush on his back trail caught his keen ear.

A look of mingled exultation and fury shot from the chief's eyes, as he placed Lula within a thicket, and drew his scalping-knife.

Half-bent, the Tonkaway awaited the advent of the spy, whom he knew to be on his track; his muscles drawn, his strength concentrated, and senses nerved.

Nor had he long to wait.

Soon the head of a Comanche brave was thrust through the bushes. He felt that he was close upon his foe. He believed the moment to be near, when he would have it in his power to gain a white captive and a scalp—the latter that of a hated Tonkaway, who had slain many of his comrade braves.

The scalp of Rattlesnake, whom he had recognized, would place him high in rank in his tribe; but the Comanche well knew the prowess, the bravery and skill of the chief he proposed to slay.

But there was no time for preparation, beyond the precautions already practiced by the spy; for before the latter had time to think, or to spring erect, the Tonkaway, with a panther-like bound, was upon him, his fingers clutching the long hair of the Comanche, and the glittering scalping-knife poised for the fatal blow.

The spy saw that he was doomed.

Only one slight satisfaction, an opening for revenge after death, remained; and, as the steel shot downward, the Comanche, with all his strength, gave out the death-yell of his tribe, in

horrid intonation, the blood welling from his mouth and nostrils before the sound ceased.

Rattlesnake was about to start again, when, the gory trophy held in triumph above his head, and the suppressed war-cry of his people upon his lips, he perceived the white maiden, standing on the verge of the thicket, clutching at the undergrowth for support; her blue eyes staring in horror, her lips apart, and her breast heaving spasmodically, as she panted for breath.

Thus standing, her golden hair half-vailing her angelic form in disheveled masses, her face the pallor of death, dazed and speechless, Lula La Coste presented a sight that was most impressive and unearthly, and which caused the Tonkaway chief to halt on the instant, and thrust the scalp of his foe under his belt behind him.

Straight as the shaft of a Comanche lance stood the chief, his blood-stained knife still in his hand, and he within three paces of the beautiful girl, whom he had risked his life to save from a terrible fate. Yet he felt that she believed him to be an enemy, bent upon her destruction.

Thus stood Lula, swaying like a willow in a summer breeze, her eyes fixed upon the princely form of the red Apollo before her.

That she had witnessed the killing and scalping of the Comanche, the Tonkaway was positive, for the horror born of the scene was mirrored in her eyes.

Only a moment stood the chief thus.

Pointing to the dead Comanche, he said:

"He heap bad red-man. Want take Sun-Hair over plain to sunset. Sun-Hair go, she never see friends more. Comanche chase Sun-Hair in river. She on white horse. Rattlesnake he dive in water. Get Sun-Hair in cave. Then Comanche no find."

"Rattlesnake, be Tonkaway. Friend to Texano. Friend to Sun-Hair. Take her to friends. Where camp?"

Not a word, in answer, came from the lips of poor Lula. She still gazed, with stony stare, at the Tonkaway, who now realized her condition, and strode to her side, taking her hand, as he continued:

"The Tonkaway chief, be friend of little Sun-Hair. She shall go to friends. Rattlesnake has spoken, and lies build not their nests on his tongue. Come!"

Passively, the maiden permitted the chief to lead her onward; she walking as in a trance.

So engrossed was the Tonkaway with thoughts and speculations in regard to his fair charge, that his usually acute senses were blunted, and he heard not the stealthy approach of the second Comanche brave. The latter, having discovered the corpse of his comrade, was doubly infuriated.

Determined to avenge his dead fellow-brave, and filled with an insane desire to distinguish himself, he glided on, catching flitting glimpses of the Tonkaway and his fair charge, as he went.

Knife in hand, his snake-like eyes flashing, and blazing with a beast-like thirst for blood, the Comanche suddenly increased his pace to a run; then, bounding like an avenging demon,

over the bushes, he landed immediately in the rear of Rattlesnake, who, with a lightning-like movement, whirled—at the same time pushing Lula from his side.

Quick as had been the spy, he missed his clutch at the plumed head of the chief; and the two stood, glaring at each other, their knives in their hands.

The Comanche was a very sinewy and powerful warrior, his muscles standing out in great knots, and his eyes filled with vengeful determination. But the eagle glance of the Tonkaway seemed to dissipate a portion of his confidence and daring.

Poor Lula shrank, in terror, to one side of the small open space, catching at the bushes for support. The words of Rattlesnake had evolved in her mind, and she had begun to comprehend that, strange though it was, he was in reality her friend.

Back and forth, in the little "open," and from side to side, the bronzed braves now fought; their eyes flashing in consonance with the glint and clash of steel.

The Tonkaway soon realized that he had met one whom it would not be easy to vanquish.

There was a quick play of steel for a time, and then each clutched the knife wrist of the other, and stood thus, panting with exertion.

Neither could now injure the other.

The terrified girl stood, gasping for breath.

The Tonkaway made one desperate effort to wrench his knife-hand from the control of his foe. A violent struggle ensued, during which the limbs of the contestants became locked, and both fell to the ground.

There they writhed for a moment, and then, by a herculean effort, the Comanche wrenched his knife-hand free. Then gaining a position astride of his foe, he raised his glittering scalping-knife over his head, to plunge it into the broad painted breast of Rattlesnake.

The latter was at his mercy.

Even now the death-yell was at his throat.

The spirits of his fathers hovered in the air, and whispered in his ears.

The chief felt that his hour had come, and that Sun-Hair was doomed.

The Comanche held his knife on high, gloatingly.

But the fates ordained that the brave Tonkaway should not die at that time.

Lula had witnessed the fearful struggle, and the fearful position in which both she and her preserver now were, nerved the fair girl to desperate action.

She would strive to save him.

Thus decided, Lula sprang forward, behind the Comanche, clutched her hands about his wrist, throwing her whole weight upon it. This unexpected movement, on the part of the white squaw, caused the Indian to lose his balance, and he fell backward.

The next instant, Rattlesnake was standing erect, with knife uplifted!

A moment, and the Comanche sprang to his feet, and jerked free from Lula, gazing in the utmost amazement, and with fierce hatred, at the fair girl, who had prevented him from gaining his revenge—balked him at the very moment

of success, when he held his foe at his mercy, and completely in his power.

That moment's delay was fatal. It was the moment of doom to the Comanche spy.

The long scalping-knife of the Tonkaway shot forward, plunging into his breast, through flesh and bone, with a horribly sickening sound. The next instant, it was jerked out, followed by a stream of hot blood, that spurted in an arch, and fell in a thick spray upon the grass and flowers.

The Comanche threw up his arms. His knife dropped to the earth, and his filmy eyes were fixed upon the sky, as from his throat came the horrid death-yell, piercing and prolonged.

The tall, strong form swayed, for some seconds, back and forth, and then fell, with a dull thud, to the earth; the soulless eyes fixed upon the starry sky.

Quickly the Tonkaway tore off the scalp, waved the same around and above his head, and then shot out the war-whoop of his tribe, exultantly.

Securing the gory trophy by the side of its fellow, Rattlesnake again grasped the hand of Lula, as he said:

"Sun-Hair wears the petticoats of a squaw, but her heart is that of a warrior. She has saved the life and scalp of Rattlesnake.

"A Tonkaway chief never forgets. Come! The war-path is open. Comanches thick as snakes in the villages of prairie-dogs."

Without a word, Lula clasped both her hands about the wrist of the chief, gazing trustingly into his painted face, and both hastened onward.

In five minutes, they reached the river, when the Tonkaway, bidding the maiden cling to his beaded bear-claw collar, swam the stream with her.

Just as they reached and were clambering up the opposite or south bank, a voice greeted him.

This caused Rattlesnake to utter a single ejaculation of pleasure and relief.

"Waugh!" burst from the lips of the chief.

Lula La Coste uttered a low outcry of most intense joy and gratitude.

"Cuss my cats! Dang my perrarer perergrinatin' pictur', ef that ain't good fer a sore eye!

"Ther bestest sight I've see'd in many a moon! Tonk, may ther Good Spirit bless yer fer persarvin' an' fotchin' our purty leetle gal back!

"Thar's water in my peeper, Lula. Chaw me up ef thar ain't!"

At this moment the wild, blood-curdling war-whoop of the six Comanche spies broke on the night, as they reached the river-bank, and there perceived the maiden and the hated Tonkaway on the further side.

Back in their teeth shot, once more, the war-cry of the Tonkaway.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE YOUNG SCOUT.

SINGLE-EYE lingered but a moment on the river-bank; for, as an echo to the war-cry of the disappointed braves beyond the stream, rung the distant war-whoops of the main party, led by Coyote. These were now dashing at full

speed up the river, on the trail of the wagon-train.

"Fotch ther leetle gal 'long lively, Tonk, an' git ready fer a reg'lar ole he scrimmage, fer hit's comin', bet yer sculp!"

With these words, the old scout rushed back to the wagon-fort, and revealed the glad news of the rescue, and approach of Lula.

As soon as the poor girl realized that she had indeed escaped, she became weak and faint with the sudden reaction of feelings and emotions.

She had suffered so much that her brain seemed on fire; and the fearful whoops which she now heard, told her that they were all in danger of being massacred.

The belt of undergrowth and timber that had been so quickly passed by Single-Eye, occupied Lula and the chief a much longer time; and, when they reached the border of the same, the Tonkaway gave utterance to a "Waugh!" of disappointment and rage.

He saw plainly that it would be impossible to gain the wagons. That the Comanche war-party, more than fifty in number, were galloping in a headlong charge upon the wagon-fort!

"Come!" said the chief, quickly. "No time talk. Squaw no good on war-path. Get kill. Lose sculp. Sun-Hair got good sculp. Comanche chief want it for shield."

"Rattlesnake, he go fight. Help Single-Eye. Sun-Hair, she save Rattlesnake. It is good. A Tonkaway chief no forget. Rattlesnake has spoken."

Lula burst into tears.

She had hoped to join her father and mother, and, if such must be, to die with them; but she saw at once that this was impossible. To delay the chief would only be lessening the chances of their safety.

From what she had seen, she knew that the Tonkaway was fearless. He would be a great help in defending the wagons; so she made no objections to his leaving her. But when Rattlesnake placed her in the crotch of a huge tree, where she was screened somewhat by the hanging moss, she sunk back, and prayed most fervently for protection for herself and her loved ones.

Here and there, about her covert, shot down arrows and bars of silvery moonlight; but she could not see the wagons within the open space of the bend. The sounds that proceeded thence, however, were far more torturing and agonizing, from the fact that she could not observe the conflict.

A vocal pandemonium ruled the bend.

Whoops, yells, and death-howls mingled with the sharp crack of rifles, and the rattling reports of revolvers. In the midst of all this, Lula was startled by the crashing of bushes below her covert, and hastily arising to a sitting posture, she gazed downward. To her great surprise she saw a white man, riding up the stream, directly toward the tree in which she sat.

This last arrival was mounted upon a superb bay horse, the saddle and bridle being of fine workmanship. He was young—not more than twenty years of age—and strikingly handsome; being clad in a buckskin suit, with a black sombrero, turned up in front, and held thus by a five-pointed silver star.

He was armed with the inevitable bowie, carbine, and revolvers, and was of symmetrical form, and evidently agile and supple in his movements.

The caution, manifested by him as he rode up, proved that he was well used to the border warfare, and that his intention was to view the bend, before revealing himself, or joining in the fray; for he halted directly beneath the tree, and so near it that Lula could have touched his sombrero.

Here, he examined his revolvers, and slipped the scabbards to the front on his belt.

The arrival of this handsome stranger gave more hope to the terrified girl.

Even situated as she was, and tortured by the probable disaster and death that might happen, Lula had been deeply and favorably impressed by the young man at first sight.

She wished, she strove indeed, to speak; but only a gurgling, gasping sound escaped her.

She feared that she would startle the stranger, that he would, on the impulse of the moment, at hearing a human voice in so singular a place—shoot at her. Nevertheless, she at length resolved to address him, just as he was about to urge his horse toward the scene of the fray.

"Oh, kind sir, please to speak to me!"

As she had apprehended, the carbine of the young man was pointed at her the instant her voice broke on his ear, but before she had ceased speaking the weapon was lowered, and the stranger gazed upward, wheeling his horse half-about.

As Lula bent forward in her eagerness, her gold-crowned head was illuminated by a bar of brilliant moonlight.

There could not possibly have been a more beautiful picture presented to view on earth—and in such a place, surrounded with the din of savage war, it was most astounding.

The youthful stranger evidently could scarce believe his own senses.

There was a show of superstitious wonder mingled with his worshipful admiration.

The youth reasoned instantly, however, that the friends of the angelic maiden must have placed her where she was for safety; and he thus spoke:

"Pardon me, miss, for my belligerent attitude; but these are dangerous times, and this, as the sounds prove, is a dangerous locality."

"I was drawn here from my camp up the river by the report of firearms and the sound of war-whoops."

"Please inform me who your friends are that seem to be besieged, and if their position is so dangerous as to cause them to leave you here alone in this wild place?"

"My father is Major La Coste. His wagon-train has been attacked by Indians. We arrived here from the Colorado last evening; but I was cut off from the train and chased by the Comanches into the river. A friendly Indian—a Tonkaway, called Rattlesnake—rescued me from the stream and saved me from being captured."

"He killed two Indians when conveying me here, and then he placed me in this tree for safety, as we could not reach the wagons."

"Single-Eye, the scout, is our guide, and

we have four negro teamsters, with their families.

"Oh, sir! you little know the anguish and horror I have suffered. My poor mother and father, for aught I know may now be dead. What—oh, what shall I do? I cannot bear this torturing suspense!"

"Miss La Costa, your experiences have been very trying indeed, and truly terrifying; but do not think of leaving this place of concealment until all is over. I intend to go to the assistance of your parents.

"I know the Tonkaway and Single-Eye. They are each feared more by the Comanches than a score of other men.

"I hope you will consider me your friend. I am known as Buckskin Ben, the Texan scout, at your service."

"And I am Lula La Coste."

Buckskin Ben doffed his sombrero in polite salutation, gazing with respectful admiration at the young girl. Lula placed her hand in his as she replied:

"Heaven bless you for your kindness! We need friends now, if ever. Papa did wrong in not heeding the advice of Single-Eye, and locating on the Llano or the Colorado. But I must not talk of that.

"If you must leave me, please return as soon as possible, for I am frantic with fear and apprehension in regard to my parents."

"Compose yourself," said Buckskin Ben; "I think you are safe here. I will return as soon as I can do so. A man who would not risk his life for you must be a coward indeed.

"Thank you ever so much for your confidence. I will endeavor to merit it and your friendship as well. Only be careful—"

A series of exultant yells and whoops of savage fury from a half-dozen warriors, here interrupted Buckskin Ben, these sounds issuing from the undergrowth all around him. The next moment he was jerked from his horse, a number of war-painted braves clutching him.

Then followed a terrible struggle.

The momentary bewilderment of Buckskin Ben was followed by most Herculean efforts for liberty; the young, agile, and sinewy scout hurling his would-be captors right and left, thus gaining a moment's freedom. He then jerked his revolvers and blazed away right and left.

The flash and the report of the revolvers of Buckskin Ben were so rapid as to be simply terrific. His aim was accurate, and the death-yells sounded as echoes to the sharp reports that rung through the arches of the bottom-timber. And the shots told.

Four braves fell, pierced through the heart, in as many instants; then a fifth sprung upon the young scout from the rear, and Buckskin Ben just saved himself by springing aside as the knife of the savage was thrust downward to pierce his back.

Dropping his empty revolvers and drawing his bowie, the young scout met the Comanche.

Both, after a few rapid passes, clutched and rolled down the bank into the washout, battling for the mastery.

Two minutes after Buckskin Ben climbed up the bank to the tree, panting with exertion, and

still grasping his bowie, from the blade of which the blood was dripping.

Hastily recovering his revolvers, he gazed up into the tree.

There was no longer either trace or sign of the golden-haired maiden.

He called aloud:

"Miss Lula! Oh, Miss Lula!"

Darkness and silence ruled the bottom, although there was still a hellish din in the bend, where the conflict was still going on.

The young scout felt that he was needed.

He knew that his place was at the side of Single-Eye and the Tonkaway, yet his heart was tortured by the disappearance of the angelic maiden, to whom he had pledged his friendship.

Where was she?

Had she sprung to the earth and fled?

Had she succeeded, during his desperate encounter with the Comanches, in making her escape and joining her people at the wagons?

In answer to these mental questions of the young scout came a piercing shriek of dread terror and hopeless despair from the timber, afar down the stream.

The cry was from female lips—from the lips of Lula La Coste, and none other!

This Buckskin Ben well knew.

He had slain five braves. The sixth had taken advantage of the confusion to steal the maiden.

To seek her before daylight would be worse than useless.

With a deep sigh of anguish, followed by a vengeful oath, the young scout reloaded his weapons, signaled his horse—the animal emerging from the thicket with a low whinny—and springing into the saddle he drove spurs, dashing toward the "open," intending to charge to and enter the wagon-fort, and assist in its defense.

CHAPTER IX.

KNOWING THE WORST.

WHEN Single-Eye left the Tonkaway chief in the bottom timber in charge of Lula, he ran quickly and clambered into the wagon-fort; and well it was that he had correctly judged the position of the war-party by the whoops, as, had he delayed a few minutes longer, it would have been impossible for him to have reached the wagons.

In that case, the entire party would have been at the mercy of the Indians.

Without the judgment and prompt action of the old scout, all would have been either slain or captured at the first charge of the Comanches. He had regretted greatly the necessity of leaving Lula and Rattlesnake, but this could not be avoided.

He realized at once, upon breaking from the undergrowth, that they would be too late in reaching the wagons.

As much, therefore, as the Tonkaway was needed, he would be forced to remain with Lula.

Single-Eye at once saw that the Comanches were confident of capturing the train. The very intonation of their whoops proved this.

As he gained the inside of the fort, he cried out:

"Ther leetle gal air safe, folkses! My pard, ther Tonkaway, hev gut her in ther timber. Don't ax no questions. Fight air ther word!

"Boyees, all hustle hyer lively! Don't crook a finger ontill I gi'ns ther word. Hyer they come!"

The old scout had ordered all the teamsters into the wagon that stood broadside at the neck of the bend, toward the Comanches. There each held his cocked rifle, with cartridges in his mouth, and his revolvers lying in front of him, on a bale of goods.

As Single-Eye proclaimed the safety of Lula, the girl's mother sprung to her feet, crying aloud in her gratitude, the major echoing her words. Aunt Lavine and the negro women were on their knees, in terror.

Down upon them came the whooping horde!

It was a most terrifying and unearthly sight, and the fiendish cries were enough to unnerve any one.

Major La Coste was firm as a rock.

From the fact that his daughter was safe, he had become more like himself, and was now stern, cool and determined.

"Gi'n 'em Hail Columby on ther half-shell, boys! Sock yer cartridges inter yer shooters lively! When I gi'ns ther word, grip sixes, an' everlastin'ly pepper 'em!"

Thus yelled the old scout.

The six Sharpe's rifles belched fire as one, and many of the Indians were seen to reel, and throw up their arms. Yet on they came, death-howls and whoops of war filling the air.

Again the deadly rifles rung, and again, and yet again; but, although a dozen Comanches were left on the back trail, dead, or too badly wounded to keep their saddles, yet unharmed rode Coyote, still urging the remainder of his braves in the desperate charge, but some twenty yards from the wagon-fort.

Again Single-Eye yelled:

"Sixes, boyees! We're gittin' ther best o' ther hellyuns!"

Instantly followed a rattling discharge of revolvers, while arrows flew like rain, burying their points in the wagon bodies.

One of the teamsters fell forward, an arrow through his vitals, while another received one of the steel-pointed shafts in his arm.

As for the Comanches, they were so terrified, that they made a curve in their course, and dashed into the timber to avoid the bullets of their foes. But the old scout well knew that this disastrous charge would doubly infuriate them, and that they would now be more reckless, and insane for revenge.

The "open" of the bend was strewn with dead and dying Indians and mustangs, some of the braves chanting their death-songs in monotonous tones.

Full a score of the savages lay thus.

"Cuss my cats!" said Single-Eye; "thet's ther bestest leetle fight I've seen in many a moon. But we-'uns must keep shady, an' feed our shooters, fer they'll be need'ed fore mornin', bet yer sweet life!"

"For the love of Heaven," pleaded Major La Coste, as he reloaded; "tell me of my child!"

Single-Eye related all that the Tonkaway had told him.

"Why did they not accompany you to the wagon?" inquired the major.

"'Cos why, ther leetle gal war too weak ter stampede this-a-way es speedy es this old raw-hide ripper. Rattlesnake see'd thet ther red cusses would gobble 'em, an' laid low in ther bush. Look out, boyees! Now yer'll see a circus!"

As the old scout spoke a score of braves dashed out from the timber, Coyote in the lead.

Beyond them in a scattered manner urging their mustangs at speed—they having left their arms in the timber—were another party of warriors, each of which, as he came to a prostrate comrade caught up the body before him, in the saddle, turned quickly, and plunged again into the timber.

Four more of the braves now dropped, with death-yells, and were also quickly caught up and carried off, amid vengeful and fearful howls.

A Comanche will risk life to prevent the corpse of a comrade brave from being scalped by their foes.

Just then came an exaggerated imitation of the warning of the "pest of the prairies," from the far end of the wagon in which our friends were stationed.

"Thar's ther Tonk, sure es shootin'!" cried out Single-Eye. "I'd rather hear his music than ther harp of a thousand strings. Glide in, Tonk! But, whar in thunder, air ther leetle gal?"

As the old scout spoke, Rattlesnake sprung into the wagon. Altogether he presented a forlorn appearance, but his mien was brave and daring.

Major La Coste grew pale, and trembled, as the old scout asked for Lula.

"Sun-Hair up in tree. Comanche no find," answered the Tonkaway. "War-path open. Rattlesnake no stay in bush. Want sound war-cry. Want scalps."

"Bully fer yeou, Tonk! Glad ther leetle gal air hunk. Scalps war plenty a bit ago, but ther red hellyuns hev scooped in all tha'r pards, what we-'uns drapped. Whar's yer shooter?"

"Rattlesnake's horse, long gun, down river."

"Wa'al, thar's plenty hyer. Thar'll be more fun directly."

Then noticing the anxious expression on the face of Major La Coste, Single-Eye inquired:

"Chief, air ther leetle gal all hunk, er kinder wilted? Air she piert, er sorter down in the mouth?"

"Sun-Hair like prairie flower when hot sun shine, and rain no fall from sky."

"She's bin worrited 'bout ter death, I reckon," said the old scout, "but she'll soon come roun' nat'ral like. But we-'uns must keep our eyes peeled. Ther red scum air hatchin' some new-fangled devilment, I'll bet my nag ag'in' a cotton-tailed rabbit!"

Mrs. La Coste and Miss Lavinia now became more composed and hopeful, and strove to encourage the poor terrified negroes, and calm their fears.

When the Tonkaway put in an appearance, they were at first dreadfully frightened; but,

when they learned that he had saved Lula from death, that he was a friendly Indian, and was come to aid in their defense, they became more hopeful, and looked with respect and regard upon the chief.

They all now stationed themselves as directed by the old scout, and gazed toward the timber from their different stations, looking for an attack from any quarter.

The full round moon shone down placidly, causing the open section of the bend to be almost as light as day.

All had become silent as the Comanches disappeared with their dead and wounded, in the dark shades; a silence which the old scout and the Tonkaway knew was ominous of coming danger. Desperate, indeed, would be the next charge, for the red demons were furious at their heavy loss.

But a few moments after the change in the stationing of the defenders of the fort, when all stood with rifles ready, they experienced a most amazing surprise; and one they had by no means anticipated.

Expecting a dash from the Comanches on any or all sides, and consequently on the alert, with senses strained, all were startled by a series of terrific whoops and exultant yells from the direction of the river, followed by a rattling revolver fusilade, and fearful death-yells.

The Tonkaway chief whirled and gazed at Single-Eye.

The old scout gave his red pard a warning look and pointed toward Major La Coste.

Both knew by the yells that Lula had been discovered, but the report of firearms was a mystery to them.

The major glanced inquiringly at the old scout, but Single-Eye bent his attention in another direction.

Both scout and chief knew that there was no chance, no hope, in an attempt to prevent the capture of the unfortunate maiden.

CHAPTER X.

A CHANGE OF BASE.

THE mystery of the revolver-shots was soon explained; for, within three minutes' time, Buckskin Ben dashed from the timber, a half-dozen braves in hot pursuit, and filling the night air with their yells.

Up to the side of the wagons Buckskin Ben galloped, and then, whirling his horse about, faced the yelling crew, a revolver in each hand, and firing rapidly. At the same time the yell of Single-Eye rung out and the war-cry of the Tonkaway, as the Sharpe's rifles belched fire and lead.

Three of the braves fell to the earth, and the next moment the young scout was within the wagon-fort, Single-Eye crying out:

"Cuss my cats, ef hyer ain't Buckskin Ben, right side up wi' care! Hev yer see'd a leetle gal anywhars in the bottom, pard?"

Buckskin Ben was panting with exertion after his desperate encounter with the burly brave in the wash-out, and his hasty retreat.

"This air Major La Coste," continued Single-Eye. "Ther outfit an' ther leetle gal I'm axin' 'bout b'longs ter him."

"Yes, my friends," at length answered Buckskin Ben; "I have in a most singular manner met Miss Lula La Coste. I had been aware of the presence of this war-party since they arrived on the river this afternoon, but I did not dream that you or any other party of whites were in the vicinity, or I should have given warning in regard to the red devils. I heard the sounds of conflict, and came immediately down the river. While sitting in my saddle, meditating as to how I could best come to your aid, I was accosted by a young lady who sat in a tree, just above and near me.

"She explained the situation of affairs, and her rescue by the Tonkaway chief; and I was about to bring her to her parents, when six Comanche braves sprung from the undergrowth, and dragged me from my horse. I killed five of the six, and then discovered, to my horror and concern, that the young lady had disappeared. The remaining Comanche had undoubtedly borne her away, during the conflict between myself and his fellows.

"I knew that it was useless for me to attempt a rescue, so I hastened to join and confer with you."

Major La Coste sunk, with a groan of agony, upon a bale of goods, and covered his face with his hands.

The women had not been able to distinguish the words of the young scout, they had been so low and guarded.

"Cuss my cats!" was the solitary exclamation of Single-Eye.

"Waugh!" broke from the Tonkaway, as he drew his knife, and circled the blade in the air.

"Wa-al," again spoke the old scout; "hit hain't no time ter worrytate 'bout anythin'. Major, brace up! Ther leetle gal ain't goin' ter git hurted yet awhile. We-'uns 'll git her outen ther clutches o' ther red heathun, er flop over an' make a die of bit a-tryin'."

"Have no fears, Major La Coste," added Buckskin Ben, confidently and encouragingly; "your daughter shall be saved. I pledge my life in her service. Had I not feared you would be all massacred, I would have secreted my horse and traced the red fiend who has carried Miss Lula away.

"But, rest assured, she will be rescued. If I can be spared here, I will go at once in search of her; even though a hundred savage eyes may be watching my movements from the start."

"Hit won't do," said Single-Eye, emphatically. "Hit 'u'd jist be like holdin' yer head down ter be skinned. Ther hellyuns 'll make some sorter break at ther wagons, afore soon, an' scupe in ther whole outfit, ef we-'uns 'lows ther leetle gal ter bother us.

"She'll be O. K. fer some periuds, an' we'll git her yit, sure es shootin'. She'll be worried some, but thet can't be prevented.

"Dang my skin! What's up now?"

The interruption was caused by the sounds of a fierce struggle in the west wagon. The Tonkaway sprung quickly into it, leaving the major in the east side of the little fort, prostrated with grief and terror.

"Rouse up, major!" said Single-Eye, sharply.

"All right, boyees! Hit's a trick ter draw all

hands ter ther west side. Skin yer peepers, an' git ready ter pick triggers."

A terrible struggle was in progress in the west wagon.

When Rattlesnake sprung to investigate, he saw a Comanche brave, close clutched by the negro teamster, each with a tight grip on the knife-wrist of the other, and both wedged between the goods and the side of the wagon.

Quickly the chief sprung to the assistance of the negro, and drove his knife to the hilt in the warrior's side. Before the knife could be withdrawn, another brave sprung under the tilt, directly upon the Tonkaway. The latter, by a gigantic effort, arose, and threw his assailant violently against the hind-board, as another brave sprung under the wagon-tilt.

Then followed a most terrible conflict, Buckskin Ben bounding to the assistance of his red pard.

This drew the attention of all except Single-Eye, who yelled:

"Hyer ther condemned skunks come! Sock hit to 'em hot an' heavy, boyees! Never mind ther scrimmage in ther west waggin."

Having detected the tufted heads of the Comanches in the tall grass, the old scout sprung to the assistance of the major, ordering the negro, who had been stationed with him in the south wagon, to follow them. The foremost Indians darted, at once, to the side of the wagon, and crouched there.

"Save yer sixes fer clos'ter work!" yelled Single-Eye, as he fired his rifle. He then reloaded rapidly, the negroes following his example.

The din had now become awful.

Shrieks from the women and children, war-whoops, death-yells and rallying cries filled the air.

The hand-to-hand conflict in the west wagon had been terrible; but the agile and skilful young scout, and the muscular chief, were nerved to battle fiercely by the piteous outcries around them.

In five minutes all was over; and, one after another, the corpses of the four warriors who had sprung into the wagon were thrown out, scalpless.

Howls of horror were now followed by vengeful war-cries, and a dozen tufted heads were thrust beneath the tilt. Then it was, that the terrible Tonkaway was in his element.

He had proved himself invincible, in the hand-to-hand combats, and now he clutched a brave by the hair, dextrously circled his knife about the Comanche's head, and tore the scalp from the shrieking warrior. At the same moment, the revolver of Buckskin Ben began to "speak," and to the point; the young scout planting a bullet into the brain of a savage, at every pull of the trigger.

Again rung the taunting war-cry of the Tonkaway.

The major, Single-Eye, and the two teamsters held their own; and in five minutes after the first discovery of the stealthily approaching Comanches, alternate yells of vengeful fury and whoops of war mingled with howls for the slain.

Utterly exhausted, Rattlesnake and Buckskin

Ben were forced to seat themselves upon the bales to rest; the belt of the former hanging heavy with Comanche scalps.

"By St. Jago! That was a lively time, Pard Rattlesnake," said Buckskin Ben; "and you were very lucky to escape death. You had a close call several times."

"Rattlesnake is a Tonkaway," asserted the chief, proudly. "Comanches are squaws. No good on war-path."

"Dang my ole gizzard ef we-'uns hesn't saler-wated 'em purty bad!" put in Single-Eye, tearing off a huge chew of "nigger-head" as he spoke.

He then reloaded his revolvers, as did they all. Then the old scout continued:

"I'm opinin' that we-'uns hes made 'em purty sick, an' thet they won't be lierble ter stompede in on us ag'in. Ef ther leetle gal war only hyer, I'd hev a strong appertite ter whistle 'Yankee Doodle,' feelin' piert an' full o' glad more'n I ever reckoned I would."

"I can't bear this suspense and anguish," exclaimed the major, in a hoarse voice. "I must make an effort to save my child from the red demons. After losing so many of their warriors the survivors will be furious, and may torture her."

"I must make an attempt to find her or my brain will burst!"

"Yer c'u'dn't never find her, major," said the old scout, with some impatience; "an' ef yer did, thet's all ther good hit 'u'd do yer."

"Ther reds 'u'd gobble yer up an' tortur' yer, dead sure an' sartain. Buckskin Ben, does yer s'pose ther hellyuns 'll make another break et we-'uns?"

"It is difficult to say. What do you think, chief?"

"Comanche heap mad. Burn wagons next. Send fire-arrows from timber."

"Cuss my cats ef I doesn't b'lieve ye're right, Tonk; an' ef they does, we're goners! What's ter be did?"

"I advise an evacuation," said Buckskin Ben.

"What in thunderation's thet?"

"Why, I think we'd better retreat to the timber west of us, keeping in a line with the wagons."

"Just now the Indians are probably conferring together, and will not discover us."

"We can retreat up the river, hido the women and children in a dry wash-out or thicket, and then search for Miss Lula."

"For Heaven's sake, let us do so at once!" pleaded the major. "If those fiends fire the wagons we are lost. I have several kegs of powder along."

"My white brother's words good," said Rattlesnake.

"Come on, then boyees! Levant air ther word!"

All sprung into the interior of the wagon-fort, and Single-Eye hurriedly explained their plan to the women.

In two minutes more the three blacks, with their wives and children, the youngest being borne in arms, were with Mrs. La Coste and Aunt Lavine, being hurried through the timber up-stream, guided by Buckskin Ben.

The old scout and the chief brought up the

rear, keeping guard and watching on the back trail.

The wagon-fort was thus left with naught except bales and corpses within and around it.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TONKAWAY'S VOW.

WHEN the six Comanches uttered their fearful war-whoop, and sprung from the bushes upon Buckskin Ben, poor Lula La Coste was not only filled with dread terror and deep concern for the safety of the young scout, but she was by these feelings rendered incapable of speech or motion.

The beautiful young girl, after passing through, in so short a time, experiences awful to think of, was paralyzed with fear and apprehension.

Her eyes were fixed in horror and torturing anxiety upon the youthful stranger, who was battling for life against such great odds.

The sharp reports of his revolver so near to her, and the death-yells, together with the fall of the braves one after another—shown in the ghastly moonlight, which rendered all black in the shade—all this dazed her brain, and her starting eyes were filled with horror, while her features were drawn and unnatural.

It was when in this state, while Buckskin Ben and the fifth savage rolled down the wash-out in a deadly hand-to-hand conflict, that the poor girl was jerked roughly from her perch in the tree, down into the arms of a most hideous Comanche brave, whose painted face, revealed by an arrow of moonlight, caused her the utmost aversion and terror.

She strove to cry out, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth, and the brave hurried away with her down the river and through the dense undergrowth.

All hope deserted the angelic girl!

She could hear the terrible sounds of savage war, and the rapid detonations of the rifles, exploding, as she well knew, in the camp of her father.

She feared that her parents and faithful slaves were being massacred.

Lone Star, she had no doubt, was slain.

The thought of all this gave the poor girl the most torturing anguish. She was now ruled by a despair that was deathlike in its intensity.

She closed her eyes and strove to pray mentally for deliverance.

Soon she recovered from her dazed condition, but she knew that to shriek out would do no good, but might cause her to be treated with more cruel brutality.

Lula looked for nothing but death at the hands of her red captors.

Not a word had the brave spoken, who clutched her in his arms so tightly as to cause her no little pain.

On and on he rushed, a grunt of exultation and self-congratulation now and then bursting from his brutal lips.

Some distance was gone over in this way, when the warrior changed the direction of his course, soon emerging into a natural opening in the timber illumined by the moon.

As he sprung free from the undergrowth, he gave a whoop of triumph.

Immediately this was echoed by many Comanches—a terrible sound, which caused poor Lula to shudder with alarm and horror.

A terrible fascination, which she could not control, forced her to open her eyes as her captor halted; and she found herself in the midst of a horde of war-painted braves.

Many mustangs were standing on the verge of the "open," secured by jaw-straps to saplings; the animals prancing about, in seeming fright, with wild and frantic snorts.

In the middle of the "open" lay a number of dead Comanches, the moonlight showing the gaping wounds and gory stains, and playing upon the glassy and sightless eyes.

Several wounded braves lay near the dead, their heads supported by saddles and blankets; some chanting their dreary, monotonous death-songs.

Painted braves stood, weapons in hand, in a massed circle around her, their snaky eyes darting glances of exultation, mingled with awe and wonder.

One of these, with three eagle-plumes in his fillet, gazed in gloating admiration and amazement into her face, feeling her hair, and running his fingers through the long golden tresses.

"Ugh! It is good. Deer-Foot shall have an eagle-feather. Coyote will place it in his fillet with his own hand. Bind the white squaw to a tree. Come, braves of the Llanos! The Texan dogs must sound death-yells. Their scalps must hang at our belts.

"Look! Many braves have gone on the long, dark trail. Texanos and negroes must die!"

Lula was placed upon her feet by her proud, exultant captor, who was greatly elated by the distinction and praise he had gained; so much so, that he dared not reveal the fate of his comrades, all five of whom had lost their lives in the attempt to capture the white squaw.

Neither did Deer-Foot inform his chief of the arrival of the young scout near the wagon-camp, although his tribe had good cause for knowing and hating Buckskin Ben.

Poor Lula could with difficulty maintain a standing position. She trembled in every limb, with horror at the fearful surroundings.

At the order, given by Coyote, every brave, except a half-dozen guards, bounded to their mustangs, and vaulted into their peculiar saddles, lashing the animals near their chief, who had held his horse by a jaw-strap, as Lula had been borne to his side.

This the hopeless maiden saw, and she felt sure that all of the wagon-train were doomed.

Then she was forced by her captor into the timber on the border of the "open," and there bound to a large tree; her arms being drawn back, around the trunk of the same.

Having accomplished this, Deer-Foot threw himself at full length near the feet of Lula, and there lay looking up into her face.

At length a copious flow of tears relieved the overtaxed brain of the poor girl; her head sunk forward, her wealth of golden hair veiling her face, and hanging nearly to her knees.

"Ugh!" grunted Deer-Foot. "Heap good scalp. Good for shield of chief."

These were the first words that had been spoken by her hideous captor, but Lula showed no indication of having heard him.

But a few moments passed, when two braves, from the "open," stalked to the side of the captive, and gazed at her, uttering significant grunts; but they were at once reminded of their duty by the ringing war-whoops of the main party, from the vicinity of the wagon-camp.

A loud cry of anguish burst from Lula at the horrible sounds, and her head sunk lower, her form being sustained by the cruel cords about her waist, which extended around the tree-trunk.

Her senses had, in mercy left her!

For half a mile, or more, were the terrified women and children conducted from the wagon-fort when a wash-out was reached, into the bed of which all descended. They then followed the same away from the river, it becoming narrower as they progressed, and also more shallow, until a point was reached where the bushes which grew on either bank formed a dense archway overhead.

Dark as Erebus was it at this point, and Buckskin Ben halted, saying, in a low voice:

"Here, my friends, I believe you will be safe from discovery. There will be no danger from the Comanches, until morning, at least. What say you, pards?"

"Heap good. Comanche no find in dark."

Thus spoke the Tonkaway.

"Hit air all hunk ter lay low in," said Single-Eye. "An' I reckon yer'll keep sorter calm an' quiet. Ther black folkses hev behaved ormighty well so fur, an' they must keep tha'r chin-music bottled up fer futur' use. Ther major, I opine, air ekil ter guardin' this outfit ontill dayligh'."

"Yer can't do any good, major, by goin' with we-'uns, fer yer ain't used ter snakin' bit through ther brush in ther dark. Buckskin Ben, the Tonk, an' this byer ole raw-hide 'll scout 'roun' a bit, givin' ther red bellyuns a spes'min o' shootin', mebbe, an' buntin' fer yer leetle gal."

"She hev gut ter be reskied, er we'll all lose ha'r. Ef we-'uns doesn't turn up by sun-up, yer kin jump mules, an' skute fer Fort Mason."

"Howsomever, I reckon thet it ain't recorded thet all on us air goin' ter flop over an' make a die o' hit. Keep a stiff upper lip, major, an' kinder console ther weemin folkses, an' we'll, some on us, see yer later on."

"You are right," said Major La Coste; "and may Heaven prosper you! I know that I am inexperienced in savage warfare, and that it is as much my duty to protect the helpless here, as to search for my daughter. I hope, from my inmost soul, that none of you will be injured, and that you will find, and rescue my darling child, although it does seem an impossibility."

Poor Mrs. La Coste grasped the hands of each of the scouts in turn, but was unable to speak.

"I know," said Aunt Lavine, "that if you can, you will save the poor child from those wretched savages, and bring her back to her father and mother."

"Cuss my cats, ef we doesn't do hit, Miss Lavine, er bu'st up ther hull univarse!"

So said Single-Eye, and his meaning could not be mistaken.

"If it be among the possibilities," added Buckskin Ben, "Miss Lula shall be rescued. I would willingly lose my own life to save hers!"

The Tonkaway stood silent for a few moments. Then he said, with more than his accustomed energy of voice and manner:

"Sun-Hair shall ride white mustang, on prairie, to Fort Mason. Rattlesnake say: Comanche no torture Sun-Hair. I have spoken."

With these assuring words, the chief and his two white pards, Buckskin Ben and Single-Eye, left the wash-out, and disappeared in the dark undergrowth, on the back trail, in the direction of the little bend and the wagon-fort.

CHAPTER XII.

THE FIRE-FIEND.

BEFORE the trio of scouts had proceeded ten yards, the war-whoops of the Comanches rung through the timber.

"Dog-gone hit, ef ther bellyuns ain't at hit again!" said Single-Eye, in a low voice. "They'll be everlastin'ly bamboozled when they find thet tha'r game hev skedaddled; an' they'll r'ar an' rage purty p'ison, I reckon."

"Buckskin Ben, ther weemin an' children kin thank yeou, fer 'scapin', an' not gittin' tha'r heads skinned. Dang'd ef ther red cusses ain't kickin' up a ole he rumpus! What sort of a lung shell we-'uns make at 'em? Le's hev a council-talk, Tonk."

"Council-talk good," returned the chief, tersely.

All halted, Buckskin Ben having evidently been engaged in deep thought, in connection with the fair maiden, and her proposed rescue.

Single-Eye noticed the unusual pre-occupation of the young scout, and guessed the cause, but he made no comment.

The manner and words of Buckskin Ben convinced him that his young pard had been greatly impressed by Lula; which the old man thought perfectly natural. In fact, he would have felt highly indignant, had not the youth expressed himself as he did.

"Whatever plan you may have formed, either of you, pards," said the young scout, in a firm and determined voice, "and I presume, knowing you as I do, that the rescue of Miss La Coste is uppermost in your minds, you may rest assured that I, at least, will proceed at once to trace her out, and rescue her at all hazards. It is torture to know that she is now in the power of those merciless red devils."

"Every moment since I saw her, has been filled with apprehension and anguish on her account."

"Plainly speaking, the wagons can go to the Old Scratch! I shall set out at once on the search for the poor girl, who is suffering every terror at this moment."

"Thet's ther sort o' gab I likes ter hear yer spit out, pard!" returned Single-Eye. "Ther bestest way ter perceed, air fer me an' ther Tonk ter crawl in ther bush on ther west side, er a leetle funder south, an' kinder draw ther 'tention o' ther red coyotes from ther east'ard, whar I reckon yer'll find ther leetle gal. Ain't thet ther p'ogramme, Tonk?"

"Heap good!" agreed the chief, laconically.

"'Nough said. Le's levant! Shake, pard! An' ef any on us aire scrooged inter kingdom come, hit'll be in a good cause."

All grasped hands at this, and parted.

Rattlesnake kept on straight ahead, and Single-Eye diverged toward the plain for some distance, and then stole to the border for the undergrowth, to the south of the wagon-fort. When they peered forth, not a Comanche was within view, and the whoops had ceased.

All was silent; but it was a silence that was ominous of something fearful to come.

Not until this moment did the old scout realize the fact that the major, and all with him in the wash-out, were in danger of discovery. This was brought to his mind by the silence that ruled in the San Seba bottom. His mind was now filled with great apprehension and concern. He could only hope that the fugitives would refrain from betraying their presence, by keeping perfectly silent.

The necessity of rescuing Lula was too pressing to be neglected for a moment.

The Comanches, infuriated at the wholesale death which had overwhelmed them, might, in their madness, torture the fair girl at any moment.

Single-Eye forced all forebodings of danger to the fugitives to the background, knowing that all his energies must be bent to the present moment, for he detected the rustle of branches on the opposite side of the "open," and knew that some plan was being put in practice for the capture or death of those who were supposed to be still in the wagons.

The old scout bent his one optic in a searching gaze upon the trees opposite. Then his rifle was raised to his shoulder, and he took deliberate aim and fired.

The whip-like crack of the weapon was followed close after by that of the Tonkaway's carbine, which sounded from toward the river.

Instantly horrible death-yells shot from the trees opposite them, and down through the branches fell two Comanche braves, the corpses lying within the clear space in plain view.

A horrible howl from the braves in the timber followed the sound of the sickening thuds of the two warriors from the tree-top.

The Comanches were furiously frantic.

No sooner had the howl of the war-party died away, than out from among the branches came a flight of fire-arrows, directly upon and into the wagon-fort.

The next moment the tilts burst into a furious blaze, the forked flames leaping upward; and at the same time, two more sharp rifle-reports rung out, and another pair of warriors went crashing to the earth.

Then out from the dense undergrowth dashed the Comanches, on their frantic mustangs, and surrounded the burning wagons, shooting volley after volley into the flames.

Single-Eye knew, by their manner, that the savages believed their victims to be in the little fort.

The wagons were now one mass of fire.

With whoops and yells the painted demons galloped around the burning vehicles in mad glee. But suddenly they halted.

They had expected the whites and blacks to

rush out at once, when they could cut down or capture them.

They now believed that the fire had cheated them out of their revenge.

They lashed their horses nearer to the flames.

Then it was that a great cloud of smoke flew upward; the flames were banished for an instant, and a terrific explosion occurred, sending burning fragments of wood and cloth in every direction.

It set on fire the tails and manes of many of the horses, and the scalp decorations of the dumfounded braves. One wagon-wheel was shot from the axle-tree, and whirled with terrific velocity, killing a warrior instantly and cutting his horse in two.

It then flew, crashing into the undergrowth, within three feet of the crouching Single-Eye, who was now shaking with half-suppressed mirth at the "boss circus."

The scene in the "open" of the bend was truly a terrible one.

After the explosion the debris burned more brightly, and the fragments burst into bright flames.

Never were seen more frantic, maddened mustangs, as they dashed hither and thither in their agony, hurling their red riders over their heads; in one instance, directly among the burning remains of the wagons.

Shrieks, howls, yells and rallying-cries filled the bend.

Some braves, tortured, like their steeds, by burns, lashed their animals through the undergrowth, over the bank, with a plunge and spatter, into the San Saba.

Luckily the grass was green, or the fire would have sped fearfully; as it was, little blazes sprung up amid the dry leaves of the bottom-timber on every side.

To say that the Indians were terrified is to put it mildly. Many, filled with superstitious awe, thought that the Good Spirit was enraged at the capture of the golden-haired squaw, and had, in consequence, doomed the war-party to destruction.

The explosion was like the thunder of his wrath, but it was such as they had never before heard.

Several times Single-Eye raised his rifle to his shoulder, and drew bead upon some paint-daubed brave; and then, lowering his weapon, with a grim, self-satisfied smile, would view the scene.

In the midst of the confusion came the well-known hiss that signaled the approach of Rattlesnake, the Tonkaway chief.

"Cuss my cats!" exclaimed the old scout, as he sprung to his feet.

The Tonkaway stood erect before him, looking so different in his mud-stained and saturated buckskins, and his crushed eagle-feathers—now revealed by the fire-light—that Single-Eye could scarce control his laughter at the sight.

The chief gazed into the face of his white pard in evident surprise; suspicious, apparently, that the explosion had unsettled the old man's mind.

This thought was quickly dispelled, however, by the return of Single-Eye's usual expression of countenance.

"Look!" said the Tonkaway, "heap fire. Heap

thunder-sound. Comanche heap scare. Good time for scalp. Rattlesnake's knife jump in sheath."

"Pard, dang'd ef I ain't gad ter see yer show up! Didn't know but what yer war sot afire, er blowed inter kingdom come. Thet war ther bestest slam-up XXX circus I ever see'd. This hyer air a p'ison hot night an' ormighty on-healthy fer Curmanches."

"Cuss my cats, ef yer doesn't look es though yer'd bin dragged through chap-ral an' bog-holes by forty hosses! Take a look inter yer glass, Tonk!"

The chief produced a small round mirror from his paint-pouch, and turning his back to the fire, gazed into it for a moment. He then viewed his form from head to foot, slowly and deliberately.

The old scout had not up to this time discovered the plight of his red pard, owing to the darkness, and Rattlesnake had evidently not given a thought to his personal appearance, although usually particular in the extreme in this respect.

"Waugh!"

This was said in evident surprise and disgust.

"Never mind, Tonk! We'll fix up a bit arter ther scrimmage air over. Ther major's wagons an' hull outfit hev gone ter smash. I reckon ther sight'll make him sick enough ter puke up his knee-pans!"

"Better thank Good Spirit got scalp on head."

"Dog-goned ef yer ain't kerrect, es usual! Whar does yer s'pose ther leetle gal air? Hev yer see'd anythin' o' Lone Star?"

"No see. No hear. Sun-Hair over there where dead Comanches"—pointing across the "open" of the bend—"thick, same as dry leaves."

"Hedn't wo'uns better glide up, an' 'vester-gate things?"

"Good! Come! Rattlesnake on war-path. Want scalps. Want hear death-yells."

"But how 'bout ther weemin? Ther cusses may drop inter ther wash-out an' kerral ther hull capoodle."

"Rattlesnake no see three shoots. No tell how many Comanches in wood. Mebbe so braves hunt for mules before powder-thunder. Come! Sun-Hair heap sick. Heap scare."

"Glide 'long! I'm with yer until ther last toot sounds. Cuss my cats ef I ain't gittin' wuss 'n bilious every time I thinks o' ther leetle gal!"

The red and white scouts then stole through the undergrowth toward the narrow opening to the plain, leaving fire and confusion behind them.

CHAPTER XIII.

BUCKSKIN BEN TO THE RESCUE.

WHEN Buckskin Ben reached a point some distance east of the swell of the bend, within which was the wagon-fort, he turned southward, aiming to gain a position near the place from which the Comanches had charged upon the wagons.

His advance thus far had been made with great caution, for he knew not at what moment he might come upon some lurking savage.

Soon the sharp and startling reports of the rifles of Single-Eye and the Tonkaway burst upon his ears, echoing with great distinctness through the natural arches of the bottom-timber. This was followed by death-yells and whoops of rage, so near to his position that Buckskin Ben turned more to the eastward, crawling now upon his hands and knees.

The reports of the rifles again sounded.

Buckskin Ben became conscious of a brightening up of the timber, which increased each moment, and he decided that the prophecy of the Tonkaway had come to pass, and that the Indians had fired the wagons.

Knowing, through Major La Coste, that there was a large quantity of gunpowder in the vehicles, the young man crouched behind a huge tree-trunk. While there his gaze was drawn upward, and he discovered a portion of the body of a wagon, which had evidently been blown high in air by the explosion, lodged in the tree-tops, and now blazing brightly.

As he thus looked, the flaming fragment of the wagon fell from limb to limb, throwing out, on all sides ten thousand fiery sparks.

At this moment the rush of a mustang, with its tail in a blaze, toward the river, lashed on by a burly brave, attracted the attention of Buckskin Ben. But this was only for an instant, for the light revealed something more.

No sooner did the young scout again look than he threw himself quickly upon the carpet of leaves, and wormed his way into a thicket, his eyes fixed and staring at the spectacle shown him by the flames.

The scene was harrowing in the extreme, and yet he felt the most intense relief and joy.

Not twenty paces to the eastward he saw the form of poor Lula La Coste, her arms drawn backward around the trunk of a tree, and secured in that painful position.

Buckskin Ben well knew that she was unconscious, that she had succumbed to the horrors of the night, and he could not suppress a groan of anguish at the sight.

A burly brave, of seeming gigantic size, stood near the fair captive, and seemed frozen to the spot with superstitious dread, although the explosion which had so paralyzed him had failed to make any impression upon the senseless maiden. Thus he stood, apparently petrified in his tracks, but with a hatchet in his hand.

That this Comanche meditated braining and scalping the beautiful captive, and then fleeing for his life, Buckskin Ben at once decided; and he immediately crawled forward, thanking the fates that the Indian was facing the recently-fallen fragments of the burning wagon.

The crackling of leaves and twigs favored the youth's approach; the slight sounds, caused by his crawling through the thicket, blending with those of the fire.

Well he knew that the Comanche brave was far stronger than himself; yet he must slay him with his knife.

He feared to use his revolver, as the report would draw the braves, who were recovering from the fright caused by the explosion, to the

spot; and then, both Lula and himself would be slain outright.

The whole timber was now illuminated, more or less, by the flames, which cast a flood of light between the tops of the undergrowth, and the lower limbs of the trees.

The serpent-like Buckskin Ben stole forward, until within some six paces of his intended victim; when, arising to his feet, he stepped clear of the undergrowth, jerking his bowie from its sheath. He realized that he would be fighting under great disadvantage; nevertheless he hesitated not.

Giving one glance at Lula's drooping form, he gathered all his muscular strength, nerved himself for the conflict, and sprang, in far-reaching bounds, upon the Comanche guard.

At the very instant that the young scout made this panther-like bound, the brave, his senses acute and on the alert, discovered his foe, but so startled was the savage that, for a moment, his arms hung limp, and he made no motion to raise his tomahawk.

Quickly, however, the warrior recovered himself, and sprang backward, at the same time raising his hatchet over his head for a terrible blow; but, as the weapon descended, the young scout caught the wrist of his foe in a vise-like grip, and buried his bowie in the breast of the Comanche.

But, it had struck too high up to cause a mortal wound, and the steel grated against the collar-bone.

In another moment, they were rolling over and over, in desperate endeavor for the mastery; their limbs interlocked, and the savage having drawn his long scalping-knife.

Then it was that Lula's head was slowly raised, and she managed, after a time, to view her surroundings.

But her features were convulsed with terror, at the sounds and sights, so strange and unearthly, that met her eye and ear.

At first, she did not perceive the two desperately struggling men; but, when she did, and recognized the handsome stranger, who had battled so bravely to prevent her capture, she strove to cry out.

The attempt, however, was fruitless.

All the agony she had endured seemed as nothing to that which she now experienced, at witnessing the fierce conflict before her.

The writhing forms rolled over and over, this way and that, their limbs thrashing the ground violently, and once both came near rolling into the fire.

Upon the success of the young scout her life depended—yet Lula La Coste thought not of this, in her dread anxiety. She only thought of him who was in such deadly peril.

Suddenly each, clutching the knife-wrist of the other, sprang to his feet, thus standing glaring into each other's eyes with murderous fury, and both panting laboriously.

Then it was that the captive maiden found voice.

Had Buckskin Ben suddenly received a shock from an electric battery which doubled strength and agility, his movements would not have been more instantaneous and beyond human power to combat.

With a herculean effort he forced the brave backward, and at the same time shot his foot forward behind the heel of the Comanche.

The latter now fell as if shot through the brain, to the ground, upon his back, Buckskin Ben falling heavily upon his foe.

The same instant the young scout wrenched his wrist free from the grip of the brave, who was for the moment stunned by the shock, and the breath knocked out of him.

Then up went the blade of Buckskin Ben, glittering in the firelight. An instant thus, and then, with a horrible, sickening sound, it was plunged through flesh and bone to the buckhorn in the Indian's breast. At the same time the young scout thrust his sombrero over the mouth of his victim, thus preventing the death-yell.

Blood spurted from the breast of the Comanche as Buckskin Ben jerked out his knife from the gaping wound. A convulsive tremor shook the red-man's strong frame, followed by a gasping and gurgling sound. Then all was over.

Springing to his feet, the youth hastily wiped the blood from his knife upon the leggins of his victim. He then slashed Lula free from the cruel bonds, clasping her to his breast in his great relief and joy at having won the desperate fight and saved her from a horrible fate.

Still clasping her in his arms, Buckskin Ben rushed eastward through the timber, his heart filled with emotions strange and most heavenly, and such as he had never before dreamed a human being capable of enjoying.

And thus trustingly and lovingly, with arms around the neck of her brave preserver, her cheek to his, her golden hair flying over his shoulder and mingling with his own wavy locks of brown—thus on through the wood they went, leaving firelight and savage, merciless foes, and also loved friends, behind them.

But they thought little of either at that time.

On they plunged into the dark shades, their hearts filled, however, with a glorious light, and a joy and relief that was inexpressible.

CHAPTER XIV.

"OUT OF THE HURLY-BURLY."

WHEN Single-Eye and Rattlesnake reached the narrow portion of the entrance to the bend, and were peering out from the bushes down toward the burning wagons, to ascertain if they could dart across without being seen, their proposed advance to discover if Buckskin Ben had learned the position of Lula, was abandoned; both being filled with the deepest concern and apprehension by hearing the report of a rifle, followed by several revolver-shots which sounded from a little distance up the river.

"Cuss my cats!" exclaimed the old scout in the greatest amazement, and with a discouraged intonation of voice as he sprang further back into the bushes; "dang'd ef ther cussed coyotes hain't tumbled inter ther wash-out, an' diskivered ther major an' ther weemin!"

"Come on, 'Tonk! They'll bash ther female weemin an' leetle ones inter cat-fish bait ef we-huns doesn't hustle ourselves. Things air gittin' mixed and mixed."

"Waugh!" was the emphatic ejaculation of the Tonkaway, as he made ready for the run.

And away the pair went, dashing out on the plain and down the border of the timber as fast as they could run, thus avoiding the difficult way through the bottom undergrowth.

But a very short time elapsed when the white and red scouts reached a point directly in a line with the wash-out, as they judged and correctly.

During the run they had heard several ringing war-cries and signal yells which proved that but a few Comanches were in the vicinity of the wash out.

The greater number of the war-party were now around the burning wagons. After losing half of their number, nothing had been gained, and they were now insanely eager for revenge.

Just as Single-Eye and Rattlesnake were about to plunge into the timber, to the assistance of Major La Coste, a piercing and peculiar yell sounded from the direction of the bend. This caused a chorus of frantic yells of rage to sound from the neighborhood of the burning wagons.

"Waugh!" said the Tonkaway. "Comanche heap mad. Buckskin Ben steal Sun-Hair. It is good."

"Bully for Buckskin Ben!" returned the old scout. "Dang'd ef I c'u'dn't jump ther San Saba'fer pure glad! Ther leetle gal air all hunk."

"Come on fer ther major! Hit's lucky ther niggers driv' ther mules a len'thy stretch up ther drink, es I tole 'em, er ther anermiles 'u'd 'a' bin gobbled up afore this."

All was still as death in the vicinity of the wash-out. This caused the two scouts to advance more cautiously. The silence implied that the repulsed Indians were still in the shades, awaiting their comrades whom they had signaled.

The Tonkaway found the head of the gully, and both followed it until they felt sure that they were in the vicinity of the point at which they had left the major and his party.

Then they halted and listened intently.

They did not think it prudent to advance further.

If Major La Coste still lived and was on the alert, he might take them for enemies, and shoot at them.

If they advanced, they must do so in a very stealthy manner. A whispered consultation between the two decided the course to be pursued.

Both sunk to the earth and crawled down the wash-out; their rifles slung to their backs.

It was quite dark in the gully; but at some points the moonlight pierced within the foliage.

Rattlesnake gave his usual signal, hoping that the major would recognize it.

Nor was he disappointed.

"Thank God! Help comes at last!"

This was said in a low, but deep and hoarse voice, which reached the ears of the scouts.

Both arose and advanced toward the speaker.

"Major La Coste!"

Thus called Single-Eye in a cautious tone.

"I am here! What news?"

"Buckskin Ben bes reskied Miss Lula. We-uns hain't see'd him er her, but we knows by ther yells."

"May the Lord forever bless him!" said the major fervently.

"Amen!" came from the lips of Mrs. La Coste and Miss Lavinia simultaneously.

"What in thunderation's been ther rumpus hyeraways?" asked Single-Eye. "We-uns heard yer shooters. Did ther hellyuns run in on yer?"

He then perceived that two of the teamsters stood a short distance below their master, and that one lay in the wash-out, dead—the second of the negroes slain during the night.

"A small party—perhaps half a dozen—came prowling this way and discovered us. We shot four, I think; but they killed poor Dick, one of the best boys I ever owned."

"I know by the explosion that my wagons and goods are destroyed; but I shall feel only too thankful if our lives are spared."

"Which won't be fer long, major, ef yer lingers hyer. Dang hit, man! Ther hull war-party 'll be rushin' on a wild stompede this-away."

"Levant's ther word, an' lively time must be made, er ther hull lay-out 'll go ter smash, same es ther wagons, though without so hefty a noise. Ef thar warn't but one red got away, hit 'u'd be enough ter rouse ther hull war-party."

"I reckon by ther row down yunder bein' stopped, thet ther condemned skunks air on ther rush ter gobble yer up a'ready."

"Boyees, gather up ther babies an' git funder west! We-uns must find ther mules, er we're goners. Gin Marm La Coste an' Miss Lavine a helpin'-hand, major, an' then skutel!"

"Ther Tonk 'll guide yer, and I'll fotch up ahint, ready fer biz. Whar in thunderation's ther Tonk?"

As the old scout propounded the question, the chief strode down the bank of the wash-out with four reeking scalps in his left hand, his blood-stained bowie in the other.

"Here is our red friend," said the major.

"Ya-as, I see," returned Single-Eye. "He's boun' not ter leave a Comanche layin' 'roun' loose, without skinnin' ther head o' ther carkiss."

All now prepared hastily for their departure.

The little negroes, who were in deep slumber, were awakened with care, and frightened into maintaining silence. Their mothers needed no cautioning, for they were dumb with grief and terror.

None thought of the destruction of the wagons. All feared that the next moment might be their last on earth.

Under the whispered direction of the old scout, they proceeded up the west bank of the wash-out; the women bearing in their arms the black babies, and Rattlesnake in the lead—a position he liked not.

"Squaws and papposes no good on war-path."

This the chief said in a low tone to Single-Eye, in evident disappointment. His one anxiety was to scout for scalps. Nevertheless he offered no further objections to acting as guide.

Thus, on they went, Major La Coste and the old scout guarding the rear.

Soon fierce war-whoops sounded from down the river.

The Comanches had evidently recovered from

the demoralization caused by the explosion, and were once more frantic for vengeance.

"Ther or'nary baked-dog-eaters air comin' up ther drink, on ther rampage, major!"

"Ef we-uns doesn't strike ther mules, an' git, this air a bu'sted outfit, clean through, sure es shootin'! Ef ther enermiles hes levanted, ther only show fer our ha'r air ter hunt a hole in ther groun' an' drag ther hole arter us.

"Dang'd ef I ain't gittin' so bilious I kin taste hit, though I hes tored more 'nigger head' ter-night than I usually does in a week!"

"If I was not sure that my daughter is safe, as you and Rattlesnake assert," returned the major, "I should be tempted to blow my own brains out. All this is my own fault, and I am in a terrible state of mind.

"Oh, that I had but listened to your advice!"

"Hit's too late now, major. Yer can't pick up spilt milk, an' thar's no use talkin'. I tole yer hit war buckin' ag'in' death an' destruction, ter glide this-a-ways.

"Es ter blowin' out brains, thar's a power o' red bellyuns ahindt we-uns, what needs ter hev thar hull cabases blowed off, an' yer'd be a dang'd sight wuss tortur'd ef they gut a hold on yer. Some on 'em gut blowed inter ther Injun bad place, et ther 'splosion, which air a sorter stan' off fer losin' ther wagons.

"Keep a stiff upper lip, an' never say die, es long es thar's a show ter draw in breathe. Ef we-uns hedn't ther weemin an' leetle ones 'long, I'd jist lay down, an' roll, an' laugh, an' t'ar grass, I'd be so chock-full o' glad et hevin' a chance ter skute roun' ther timber, an' bore reds an' skin thar heads, wi' ther Tonk an' Buckskin Ben!

"Cuss my cats, ef ther chief hain't run dead ag'in' ther anermiles! Dog-gone my gizzard, ef I doesn't b'lieve we're goin' ter skin through!"

The old scout was right, for the party broke into a natural "open," in which the mules stood listlessly, and half-asleep, after grazing to their stomachs' content.

The Tonkaway chief halted.

Single-Eye now gave his orders in a rapid and decisive manner.

The more gentle of the animals were caught, the neck-ropes being placed with a twist about the lower jaws. The women were then placed astride, with the babes in their arms, and the ropes were passed to them, after being coiled, and then secured thus, at the right length.

The older children were also, in like manner, mounted, and then the major, the old scout, the Tonkaway, and two slave teamsters selected their own.

This accomplished, all rode out from the timber to the open plain.

The whoops and yells of the savages now sounded through the timber—yells of baffled rage.

Single-Eye and Rattlesnake asserted that the main body of the Comanches had reached the wash-out, discovered slain and scalped comrade braves, and the escape, for the second time, of their intended victims. Their trail could be followed slowly, as patches of moonlight illumined the same here and there, and the women and children had left plain "sign," by breaking bushes, and riding in a hurried manner, one after another.

It would be some time yet, before the Comanches would reach the mules, and ascertain the manner and direction of their flight. They were now striking out toward Fort Mason, on the Rio Llano.

Every eye was busy, for a long time, scanning the timber, hoping that Buckskin Ben would be on the border of the same, with Lula, and join them; but they were doomed to disappointment in this respect.

Afar out on the plain they proceeded, until there was no longer any possibility of being seen by the Comanches; who would not, if they discovered those they sought, dare follow them, for fear of meeting a detachment of troops from Fort Mason.

Upon reaching a point of safety, Single Eye and the Tonkaway, after bidding all farewell, impressing upon the major the necessity of haste, and giving explicit directions as to the course to be maintained, much to the regret of all, whirled their mules about, and galloped back to the San Saba; aiming to strike the river a mile north of the big bend—their intention being, to recover their secreted horses, and then search for Buckskin Ben and Lula La Coste.

CHAPTER XV.

ON THE STAMPEDE.

It was guard mount at Fort Mason the morning following the, to our friends, most eventful night on the San Saba, when a ranchero, who lived half a mile from the post, galloped to the parade-ground, within the square of barracks, and informed the commanding officer of the approach of the strangely-mounted cavalcade of women and children, white and black—also giving information in regard to the war-party of Comanches on the San Saba, and their work of the previous night—information gained from Major La Coste, who headed the cavalcade.

The fort was garrisoned by infantry, which fact caused the General Government, or the Secretary of War, to be often cursed as well as ridiculed; but there chanced to be a detachment of the old gallant Second Cavalry encamped in the oak openings near the fort, who were on their way back to Fort Belknap.

The officer in command at Fort Mason instantly dispatched an orderly to the cavalry camp.

Both orderly and ranchero spurred their horses at full speed, and in five minutes the important information was communicated to the captain.

The bugle sounded at once, and soon the latter, at the head of forty gallant boys in blue, galloped through the post-oaks toward the open prairie that stretched afar toward the Rio San Saba.

Most eager were they to meet the red foe, the information given by the ranchero having caused great rejoicing in the camp.

Soon the strange and laughter-creating cavalcade was met, and the captain halted to confer with Major La Coste.

Not a smile, however, rested on the faces of the soldiers, for the anguished and baggard appearance of the blacks and whites proved their great suffering, and hinted at dangers just past that banished all mirth from the beholders.

The little negroes, their great eyes starting in wonder, their faces yet stamped with terror—all clutching for dear life at the stubby manes of the mules, presented a most laughable appearance.

But a few moments was the halt made, the outlines of events, the presence of the scouts and the Tonkaway on the San Saba, and the location of the little bend above the abrupt turn in the river, being explained by Major La Coste. Then, with a rousing cheer, the detachment drove spurs and sped on, the cavalcade, led by the major, proceeding to Fort Mason.

In a quarter of an hour more the entire party were receiving every attention from the officers of the post and their sympathetic wives, the negroes being assigned to an empty barrack, and furnished with everything necessary to their comfort.

The anxiety and apprehensions of Major La Coste, his wife and sister, in regard to Lula, however, was not abated one iota; for, upon reflection, they feared that Buckskin Ben and the idol of their hearts had fallen into the power of the Comanches, otherwise they would have been seen, or would have reached the fort—as the young scout, had he regained his horse, was well mounted.

In every, and in all ways, did the officers seek to encourage hope in the hearts of the anguish-stricken family, but with little success.

Upon reaching safety, as is natural with us all, the loss of his wagons and effects caused the major much repining; and he paced continually, back and forth, the floor of his apartment, his hands clasped behind him, his proud form bent forward, and he gazing abstractedly before him—his face showing plainly the self-condemnation, regret and misery, that he had, and still suffered.

When Single-Eye and Rattlesnake parted from Major La Coste and his party, they, as has been mentioned, pointed northerly, aiming to strike the San Saba at a point above the big town. From thence they intended to head further north, if they considered it necessary.

Should the Indians discover them while on the mules, they would be doomed; for the animals were thin in flesh, and somewhat broken up by traversing the long trail from the San Antonio, the sun having been excessively hot.

Fortune favored them, however; for a patch of dense clouds sailed slowly up from below the western horizon, and just as they reached a point where danger of discovery was not only possible, but probable, obscured the silvery moon.

Then it was that Single-Eye and the Tonkaway, congratulating themselves, lashed the mules with the slack of the neck-ropes, on toward the San Saba, luckily dashing into the shades before the clouds passed over the Queen of Night.

The scouts were no sooner "in cover," than both sprung from the weary animals, and removing the ropes from their jaws, urged them out upon the plain.

They were now very anxious in regard to their much-prized steeds, each having owed his life, many a time, to the speed of his animal;

and they, at once, hastened up the river, to secure them at all hazards.

As will be remembered, the Tonkaway had left his black steed at the place where he had discovered the Comanche war-party; this being some distance below the location chosen by the Indians for a camp. There, much to his joy and relief, he found the horse, unmolested.

Tightening the girth and adjusting a jaw-strap, the beast showing evidences of extreme delight, our red friend felt greatly relieved, and equal to any emergency. The presence of the animal proved that the Comanches had not been down the river very far, in search of Buckskin Ben and Lula; or, if so, they had not searched the timber thoroughly.

This conclusion gave rise to another possibility.

The young scout and the maiden might have been captured near the Comanche camp.

"Cuss my cats, ef things doesn't 'pear sort o' bilious!" said Single-Eye. "Hit's too still, up ther drink to suit me. Looks es though ther condemned coyotes hed kerraled ther leetle gal and Buckskin Ben, er they'd be whoopin' 'round 'mong ther bush arter 'em. What yer think, Pard Tonk?"

"I hedn't time ter look Skip-lively up when we-'uns levanted wi' ther weemin, an' I s'pose I'll be 'bleeged ter skate 'cross ther 'open,' west, an' smell 'roun' arter him, but hit'll be p'ison risky biz."

Rattlesnake did not appear to have heard him.

"What yer gut inter yer sculp now, Tonk?" asked the old scout, somewhat surprised.

"Wait!" answered the chief, raising his hand in a gesture of caution.

The next moment, a series of most unearthly howls filled the bottom-timber, up the river.

"What in thunderation's ther rumpus up-crick?"

"Good," was the reply of the Tonkaway. "Comanches have death-dance. Heap howl. My white brother, go for horse. Comanche no see. All in timber."

"Dang'd ef yer ain't kerrect! Hit's a good time ter go fer Skip, an' ter stompede ther remainder o' ther mules, an' ther mustangs we kin scrouge in."

"Single-Eye talk good. Comol!"

Without further delay both left the timber.

By crossing the triangular open plain, time was saved, besides avoiding the danger of passing in the near vicinity of the howling Comanches.

The Tonkaway well knew that all, except the guards of the animals would be in the death-dance; and, as no enemies were supposed to be to the west of the river, there probably would be no sentinels posted.

This they soon proved. Upon passing the belt of timber, and crossing the river, they found themselves at the spot where the mules had been discovered, but the animals were not to be seen.

Single-Eye had crossed the open to the west side, and gave a peculiar signal. Instantly it was replied to by the joyful neighing of a horse.

"Cuss my cats!" he exclaimed; "ef thar ain't Skip!"

Through the undergrowth they now proceeded,

when the old scout broke into another "open" of small extent.

Again his odd laugh burst on the air.

"Double up, an' dang me, ef Skip hain't bin on the war-path, too! Jist gaze et ther critter, Tonk."

A strange sight it was indeed.

In the middle of the "open" stood the one-eyed, raw-boned steed of Single-Eye, one foot firmly planted on the mutilated corpse of a Comanche brave.

"Thet cussed Curmaneh' thort he'd kerral Skip, but he gut kicked inter kingdom come, on ther cyclone whiz! I'm bettin' ther cuss didn't git a show ter yell."

"Heap good horse. Too bad spoil scalp," said the chief, regretfully.

"Yer allers looks out fer ha'r, doesn't yer, Tonk? Wa-al, yer sees, Skip does ther best he knows how."

The two scouts rode slowly down the river, and approached the "open" where the wagons had been burned in a very stealthy manner. They then perceived that the part nearest the plain was filled with the mules, some horses also belonging to Major La Coste, and the mustangs of the Comanches.

Nothing except a smoldering heap of ashes and iron remained of the wagons and goods.

Two Indians were guarding the animals; but the scouts well knew that only the mustangs of the slain were in the herd.

Their plans were soon formed.

Rattlesnake dismounted, and made his way through the undergrowth until he could obtain a view of the "open," in which the Comanches were performing their unearthly ceremonies over the dead.

It was evident that neither Buckskin Ben nor Lula were captives. This was welcome news to Single-Eye.

Much relieved, the scouts proceeded to action.

Gaining favorable positions, they spurred at headlong speed, each upon a sentinel, clutching the victims by the hair and slashing their knives across the Comanches' throats; thus preventing the death-yell.

Tearing off the scalps, both urged their horses toward the herd, shaking their *serapes* of many colors in the air.

With snorts of fright, the mules and mustangs dashed toward the plain, the scouts close in their rear, and turning the animals toward Fort Mason.

The gray streaks of morning had shot up in the east, when Single-Eye discovered his horse, Skip-lively; and, as the herds dashed out on the plain, the sun was just peeping above the horizon.

Terrific whoops and yells of baffled rage sounded in their rear; but on galloped the daring pair, and on thundered the herd, in a wild stampede.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TUG OF WAR.

WHEN Buckskin Ben made his escape with Lula La Coste, he was as happy, perhaps, as any man on earth ever was.

Having been for some years a roamer of the

plains, he had not mingled with any of the fair sex, except the uneducated matrons and maidens of the extreme frontier, who were far from being refined, in manners, habits and appearance.

Consequently, the extraordinary beauty of the young girl infatuated him at first sight.

The die was cast, and each became aware that the love and presence of the other would be necessary to future happiness; each, also, being confident that the other was governed by the same feelings.

But Buckskin Ben and Lula were not yet "out of the woods," either in reality, or agreeably to the old adage; and the young scout realized that the danger of capture had for him now, ten thousand times the horror if had ever before possessed.

He knew that it would be next to impossible for him to escape without his horse. Once upon that well-tried beast, with Lula in his arms, he feared nothing. No animal in the Comanche war-party could even keep within view on the plain, after a fair start.

When he had galloped to the wagons, and sprung from his horse, after shooting down a number of his pursuers, the animal had darted toward the plain, entering the timber toward the north.

If the horse kept in the timber it would not now be far from the point for which Buckskin Ben was now aiming; for he knew a winding gully about a quarter of a mile from them, which led from the plain, through the timber, to the river.

Hastening on, he soon reached the wash-out, and ran up the same some distance without halting.

Then he placed the maiden upon her feet, she still trembling and unable to speak.

"Miss Lula, I am almost confident that you will see no more of the fiendish Comanches."

The young girl murmured something in her flute-like voice, which seemed in consonance with her beauty of face and form.

"It seems to me," said the young man, "that I am far more blessed than ever man was before."

"I love you, worship you, Lula La Coste. This world would be a chaotic blank to me were I deprived of the happiness of seeing, meeting, and loving you!"

"Buckskin Ben," said the girl, at length, "I hope never again to experience the agony I endured when I saw you struggling for life with the hideous brave who guarded me. Had you lain dead before me then, I should have welcomed death for myself as a blessed relief."

"Heaven bless you, Lula! The world will indeed be bright and beautiful now, since I know of your presence on it, and that your love is mine."

"Here let us vow eternal constancy! We have, in a most mysterious manner, been brought together amid danger and death. Let nothing now come between us. Let not your love die or wane, or this world will be a hell to me."

"You saved my life, and it is yours," was the low-spoken reply.

"My life," rejoined the youth, "shall be spent

in endeavoring to promote your happiness. I almost fear that my own is now too great to last—that something will occur to plunge me into despair.

"But I must not think of this.

"I must find my horse, for we are not yet safe. Every moment is full of danger and death.

"It is tearing my very heart-strings to leave you; but it must be, and at once.

"Trust in me. I will secrete you where, should those red demons come, they will not find you."

Poor Lula shuddered from head to foot as Buckskin Ben led her up the wash-out and spoke thus; but she offered no words of objection, knowing that he would not leave her if it were not necessary to insure their safety.

Soon the maiden was ensconced in a branch gully, quite small and deep as well as dark, and the young scout started off with quick and careless strides, proving his preoccupation of mind. He carried his revolver at full cock, and fortunate was it that he was not forced to venture near to the Comanche war-party.

Just as Buckskin Ben heard the yells that announced the rescue of the captive, he was filled with relief and thankfulness, for before him stood his faithful horse. Mounting quickly, he urged the animal down the wash-out, and in a few minutes Lula, in the arms of her preserver, was flying like an arrow shot from a bow northward, along the borders of the timber of the Rio San Saba toward the Rio Colorado.

This course was maintained for some three miles; then, allowing the horse to slacken its speed, Buckskin Ben guided the animal out on the open plain, and proceeded southeast, toward Fort Mason.

Soon the horse dropped into a walk, and poor Lula sunk into a deep slumber, her weary heart and brain at rest for the time being.

And slowly, out of consideration for the sleeping maiden, Buckskin Ben proceeded, until long after the sun arose, and he could see, afar off, the post-oaks that surrounded Fort Mason.

He hoped that Major La Coste and his party had long before reached the post; as he had believed it to be the intention of Single-Eye and the Tonkaway to transport them thither.

He had not dared risk the life of Lula by keeping on up the river, in an endeavor to ascertain the state of affairs; but he had little doubt as to the safety of the party.

The frequent reports of rifles and revolvers, just previous to and after the explosion, had proved that the old scout, his red pard, and the major were on the alert; and the absence of any signal yells, usual on capturing an enemy, or slaying one, caused Buckskin Ben to think that all was well.

And on he went, slowly, as described, Lula sleeping in his arms, until at length his eagle eye detected a break on the plain to the south.

Soon he perceived that, not only was there a large herd of mules and horses being driven toward Fort Mason by two men, but that the drivers were pursued by a score of Indians.

At once the young scout decided that Single-Eye and the Tonkaway were the stampedeers, and that the animals were the mules belonging

to the train, and the mustangs of the slain Indians.

There appeared to be quite a distance between the pursued and the pursuers, and but little time had passed, when the young scout suddenly became aware that, if the Indians should give up the chase, they could cut him off from Fort Mason, and force him, either back to the San Saba, or north to the Colorado.

His heart sprung to his throat, and he drove spurs deep, his horse bounding at headlong speed. This awoke Lula, who gazed into the anxious face of the young man, before he was aware that she had been aroused.

Guided by his gaze, she glanced over the prairie. Then she sprung upward, clasping her arms about Buckskin Ben's neck, and crying out:

"Oh, can it be that we are lost after all; that we must die at the hands of those painted savages?"

Buckskin Ben replied, quickly and reassuringly:

"Do not fear, Lula! I can outrun them; but I am trying to reach Fort Mason, where I am pretty confident your father and mother now are. I can head for the Colorado, if the Comanches should succeed in cutting us off.

"Don't you see those two men in the rear of that fast-galloping herd of horses and mules?"

"Yes—oh, yes!"

"Well, those are your father's mules. They have been stampeded from the Comanche camp by Single-Eye and Rattlesnake, the Tonkaway.

"The Indians have given up chasing them, I see. They have discovered us, and mean to capture us if they can."

"But they cannot, can they?" cried out Lula, joyously, pointing ahead of them with her finger.

"Look! There are the 'boys in blue.' See the sabers, how they glitter! We are saved!"

The young girl burst into thankful tears, thus relieving her overtaxed brain.

"I declare!" returned the young man, intense relief and joy in his voice and glance of eye; "you are a better scout than I am, Lula!"

"The Comanches, however, were claiming my full attention, and the cavalry have but just darted out of the oaks.

"Hurrah for the gallant old Second Cavalry! That's my old friend, Captain Long—God bless him!"

"But I am glad, Lula, that your tears prevent you from seeing those red fiends. Never before have they appeared so hellish."

"I do not wish ever to see an Indian again, unless it be that faithful brave who saved my life," said Lula, with a shudder.

To describe the scene on the prairie, that bright sunny morning, would be impossible.

We may merely attempt to outline it.

Away to the southeast of the position of Buckskin Ben and Lula La Coste, stampeded the herd of animals; controlled as much as possible in the direction of Fort Mason, by the two scouts.

To the south, having just jerked their foam-flecked mustangs to a halt, were a score of fierce, revenge-maddened, paint-daubed Comanches, in all their paraphernalia of savage war; hideous as fiends from Gehenna, and frantic with baffled rage. For they had just discovered the "long-knives" (cavalry), and they knew that, not only had they lost all chance of regaining the herd, and capturing the golden-haired maiden and the young scout, but that, beyond doubt, they were doomed to death!

On, thundering over the plain at full speed, toward the Comanches from the east, dashed the "boys in blue;" their sabers clattering, and revolvers in hand—Captain Long at their head.

The war-party whirled, and lashed their mustangs on the back trail; gazing behind them with bated breath.

On bounded Buckskin Ben, the right arm of Lula La Coste around his neck, his own encircling her waist; her angelic face being turned toward the cavalry, and her golden hair flying in the wind of their speed.

On, until the troops were met, and then a simultaneous rousing cheer rung from every throat, as Captain Long waved his sword, in recognition of the young scout, wonder being visible in the eyes of all as the beautiful maiden met their view.

Circling his sombrero gracefully, Buckskin Ben shot past the fast speeding cavalry, welcome words to both Lula and himself being shouted by the captain.

"Major La Coste, his wife, and sister are at the post. Hasten on with their lost darling!"

Buckskin Ben gazed into Lula's eyes.

She was weeping convulsively. But they were tears of thankful joy.

Over the meeting of the "boys in blue" and the red torturers of the plains we draw a veil.

There was too much of horror in the fight, although it was between equal numbers.

CHAPTER XVII.

SADDER AND WISER.

KIND reader, we have little more to detail in connection with those whom we have followed through the startling occurrences of a brief space of time.

Major La Coste paced the apartment assigned him, while his wife and Aunt Lavine, although nearly prostrated by the horrors of the night, and their tiresome ride, accompanied by want of sleep, sat weeping, with their arms about each other, upon a lounge in the adjoining room.

The slaves, with the exception of the two women who had been made widows in so tragical a manner, all slept profoundly. The latter two were alternately weeping and praying.

The major, his wife, and sister, notwithstanding the assertions of the Tonkaway and Single-Eye in regard to the rescue of Lula by Buckskin Ben, had become hopelessly despairing as time passed and their darling did not arrive. The worst was to be apprehended.

Thus the time passed most slowly and misera-

bly with them, the officers of the post and their wives considerably leaving them to their meditations and grief, as they could with no reasonable ground offer consolation.

But they were destined to have their grief suddenly dispelled, for an orderly entered the apartment as the forenoon began to wane, and with a salute, informed the major that the commandant of the post wished to see him and the ladies at once.

Greatly puzzled and somewhat indignant at the interruption of his thoughts, the old gentleman took an arm of his wife and sister and followed the orderly. The latter left the parade-ground, and passing through the gate, stood some paces from it, giving a wave of his hand to direct the party onward.

A group of officers and their wives, all with joyous faces, welcomed the major and the two ladies who, as far as it was possible, banished their grief in politeness and consideration for the feelings of their kind hosts.

"We wish to give you a glad surprise, my friends," said the major commanding the Eighth Infantry. "I have just received news that parties are approaching who passed the last eventful night with you."

"I stationed a mounted man of my troop on the edge of the oaks, and he has brought the intelligence I speak of. Look toward the west!"

There was no need to bid them look, for the loud rumbling of many hoofs, coming at terrific speed, drew every eye.

A large herd of mules and mustangs, covered with foam, and in a state of frantic fright, came dashing through the oak opening, and in the direction of the barracks.

A score of mounted rancheros were on hand, and headed the herd into a large corral.

Major La Coste recognized his mules.

Close after galloped Single-Eye and the Tonkaway chief.

"She is lost!" exclaimed Major La Coste. "My darling, my Lula, is lost forever! The red fiends have tortured her!"

Mrs. La Coste uttered a shriek and would have fallen but for Miss Lavinia.

"Not so fast, major! Not so fast!" said the commandant, quickly. "I ought to have told you, I suppose, in the first place."

"I did not know you were so hopeless in regard to your daughter. Look west again!"

"That is what I call a glorious sight. God bless the brave and daring young scout, Buckskin Ben!"

A glorious sight it was!

Down toward the group at headlong gallop, dashed Buckskin Ben, with Lula in his arms, her golden hair flying wild and her face beaming with joy and thankfulness.

The noble horse, although covered with foam, as if conscious of his precious burden, seemed to throw off every sign of fatigue, and tossed its head up and down, its mane and tail flying free.

Straight up to the father and mother of the maiden dashed Buckskin Ben, his horse coming suddenly to a halt before them.

With a glad cry, Lula sprang into the outstretched arms of her father, while her mother

and aunt staggered forward, and wound their arms about her also.

Thus they remained, with emotions too deep for utterance, until Lula, ever considerate and now more than ever so, released herself, saying:

"Father, mother, you would never have seen me again—I should have been cruelly tortured ere this—had not this brave young scout twice risked his life to save me!"

All in the fort now pressed forward to offer their congratulations, and Major La Coste, catching the hand of Buckskin Ben, wrung it in speechless emotion and gratitude.

Single-Eye, who now came up with Rattlesnake, observing some affectionate demonstration toward the young scout on the part of Mrs. La Coste and Aunt Lavine, halted, saying:

"Cuss my cats, Pard Tonk, ef I'm a-goin' any nigher! Hit's dangercus jist 'bout now.

"Ther weemin hev run plum lunyfried—dang my ole gizzard ef they hain't! They're gittin' es hefty on the hug es a grizzly b'ar."

We must not imagine that the fair Lula so far forgot herself during these somewhat boisterous greetings, as not to perceive in the near distance the old scout and the chief, to whom she owed so much.

She rushed toward him, and had kissed the former before he had any suspicions as to her intentions.

It was too much for Single-Eye.

"Cuss my cats!"

He could find no other language in his terrible embarrassment, to express his outraged feelings.

Rattlesnake stood proudly, his black eyes fixed upon the face of the maiden as she thanked the old scout for the noble service he had done in saving her parents, her aunt and the slaves from death.

Who shall say what were the thoughts of the bronze prince of the prairies?

Did he think that Sun-Hair had forgotten him?

If so, he was quickly undeceived, for the beautiful girl sprung forward and embraced him also.

The stoical features, upon which had been so long frozen a murderous expression, now softened. A glitter of joy, never before seen in his eagle eye, surprised his white pard, as he placed the hand of Lula upon his breast over his heart, saying:

"Rattlesnake is proud that Sun-Hair is his friend. His heart swells big in his breast. He forgets the war-cry of his tribe when he looks in her eyes. It is good.

"The smile of the Good Spirit follows her trail, and shines in her hair.

"Look!"—jerking a mass of reeking scalps from his belt—"a Tonkaway chief has not a forked tongue. Rattlesnake swore that the Comanches should sound death-yell."

Circling the scalps over his crushed eagle-feathers, that drooped, and mingled with his long hair, the chief gave utterance to the war-cry of his tribe, in exultant intonation.

A shudder convulsed the frame of Lula; but, recalling the fact that she owed her life to the Tonkaway, she conquered her disgust and aver-

sion at the sight of the scalps. Taking a hand of each of the scouts, she led them to her father and mother.

Further description of this joyous reunion, we will not attempt to recount.

A banquet was gotten up, in honor of the occasion, which was greatly enjoyed by all.

Our friends remained at the fort for some days; and, in the mean time, an express was received, to the effect that the war-party of Coyote had been "cleaned-out," by the boys of the Second Cavalry.

Major La Coste, after his sad experiences, needed no further persuasions to settle on the Rio Llano, near the fort; in fact, he located a ranch adjoining that of Buckskin Ben, whose real name was Richard Reynolds.

Buckskin Ben—for so we must still call him—was a wealthy young ranchero, who employed a superintendent while he roamed the prairies, from a love of adventure.

But this longing for a roving life was dissipated by the fair Lula; and the major, and his wife, such was their regard and respect for Buckskin Ben when they came to know him well, that when he pleaded for the hand of their only daughter in marriage, it was not refused, but freely given him.

Then it was, that Major La Coste confessed that his principal reason for removing to the frontier, was the fear that one of the many dissipated sons of his neighbors would win the love of his innocent child.

He little dreamed, that she was destined to meet her fate, in a border scout, and that before he himself had located a ranch.

Six months from the eve of terrors, with which our story opens, Lula La Coste was the bride of Richard Reynolds.

Rattlesnake was with Single eye, his pard, present on the occasion; and the officers of Fort Mason, with their wives, contributed to make it pass off as pleasantly as most such happy events do, under such circumstances.

Buckskin Ben and his beautiful wife were universally known in West Texas; their hospitable home being open to all, and especially to their firm friends, Single-Eye and the Tonkaway.

In the course of time, little Lulas and Richards gathered prairie flowers about the ranch or played beneath the moss-draped bottom-timber; and the happy parents still live, loved and respected, their boys being expert lassoists, reckless riders and, as Single-Eye expresses it, "right thar," when it comes to glancing through the sights of a rifle, or "jerking a six," in an off-hand shot.

THE END.

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